

## Executive Summary

This paper addresses the intersection of two unmistakable international trends: the global “democratic recession” and the role of religion in politics. In election season, religious dynamics are at times implicated in the rise of authoritarianism; religious, racial, and gender-based exclusion; social polarization; and political violence. However, religious actors can also serve as resources for promoting robust electoral institutions by lending legitimacy, moral authority, and organizational capacity to pro-democracy efforts. In practice, religious organizations are often woven intricately into the domestic civil society that is central to stable democracy.

This paper focuses on one dimension of response to democratic backsliding: strengthening electoral integrity.<sup>1</sup> In teetering democracies from Turkey to the Philippines, practitioners need guidance on responding to the ambivalent relationship between religion and electoral institutions and processes, integrating religious dynamics into their assessments, and, where appropriate, planning programmatic engagements. If carefully conceived, religious dynamics and actors can make diverse contributions to electoral integrity across the election cycle, stretching from pre-electoral assessments to post-election lessons-learned exercises. Without addressing the topic, international governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGO) actors may struggle to understand local religious dynamics, feel constrained by donor countries’ laws that limit state involvement with religion, or be concerned about counter-productive intervention in local religious affairs.

This white paper aims to help the electoral support community—election management bodies (EMBs), other interested government institutions, and NGOs—to better (1) assess the range of ways in which religious actors shape the electoral cycle and (2) respond appropriately to religious dynamics in electoral planning.

## Guiding Principles

Several themes emerged repeatedly in research for this report. We present them here as guiding principles for electoral support organizations interested in accounting for religion.

- **Right-size religion’s impact on elections.**<sup>2</sup> Religion’s impact on electoral integrity varies widely, even among religious actors within a single country. Some leaders (clerical or not) may utilize religious claims to undermine integrity, especially by contributing to the electoral exclusion of vulnerable communities. Others may lend organizational resources, legitimacy, and moral authority to promote integrity. And still, others may be largely irrelevant, unable to exert independent influence beyond more important political, economic, or social forces. Assessment efforts should identify the nature of religion’s influence in a given context, and programmatic responses should reflect these assessment conclusions.

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars have documented that a significant amount of democratic backsliding takes place outside of electoral institutions, for instance, in efforts to undermine independent judiciaries. See, for example, Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. Broadway Books. Without downplaying these challenges to democracy, they are outside of the scope of the present analysis, which focuses on electoral institutions.

<sup>2</sup> For a more extended discussion of the concept of right-sizing, see Mandaville, Peter. 2021 "Right-Sizing Religion and Religious Engagement in Diplomacy and Development." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 19, (sup1): 92–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1983345>

- **Diversify involvement of religious actors.** This may include representation from various religious traditions, especially minority and marginalized religious groups, as well as internal diversity within a single religious tradition. Moreover, those actors should account for diverse varieties of religious leadership. A religious actor can range from official clerical leadership to women’s networks, youth groups, non-clergy thought leaders, and even social media personalities.
- **Draw from flexible engagement possibilities.** Religious actors and organizations may contribute to election integrity in diverse ways across the election cycle. These could include moral appeals from national leaders encouraging political participation but could also involve religious groups as sources of local infrastructure, volunteer recruitment, communication capacity, or online engagement. Religious actors and organizations may have the unique potential to engage difficult-to-reach segments of the electorate, for instance, outside urban centers.
- **Do no harm.** The electoral support community should only pursue engagement with religious actors and institutions when doing so promotes the overall integrity of the elections. Religious engagement may bring some risks. Engagement could stoke rivalry among religious actors in society. Some religious leaders and organizations may be uninterested in engagement efforts. Not all religious actors who promote the integrity of elections may be equally committed to women’s leadership, equal rights for minorities, or LGBTQI+ rights. At the same time, engaging potentially problematic religious actors may be consistent with a “Do No Harm” policy if it is tailored to reduce negative influences.

## Recommendations: Potential Practitioner Responses

We propose several practical steps to account more thoroughly for the influence of religion in the electoral support community’s work, grouped into three categories: general interest, those focused on assessment, and those focused on engagement. For purposes of this paper, we include observation, pre-election technical assessments, post-election reviews, and other forms of index development in the “assessment” category. We consider “engagement” as providing assistance in implementing elections, either directly or in an advisory capacity, as well as public diplomacy efforts promoting electoral integrity and security. These responses should take place over time, not only in the period immediately before the election, to encourage trust-building with religious leaders who may be unfamiliar with the electoral support community.

### General

- **Build staff capacity.** The electoral support community should consider following institutional staffing practices that they already utilize in areas such as gender, disability, and youth considerations to integrate religion into electoral assessments and engagements. This could involve committing internal staff time and resources or building staff capacity via internal training. It could also draw on consultations with outside subject matter experts.
- **Liaise with religion and development specialists.** Electoral support organizations should proactively build relationships with experts in religion and development in government, civil society, and academia. Expertise

in religion and development exists, but it has not generally involved significant focus on projects related to the electoral support community.

- **Clarify legal and organizational standards.** Different members of the electoral support community have distinct legal or mission-based standards when interacting with religious actors and organizations. Governments in different donor countries face vastly different legal frameworks regulating religion-state contact. While standards will not be universal, having publicly available organizational guidelines regarding religious engagements can clarify the potential scope of those relationships for both staff and external actors.

## Assessment

- **Integrate religion into organizational assessment.** Various assessment frameworks exist to structure data collection via pre-electoral assessments, election observation missions, and post-election reviews. The electoral support community should ensure nuanced attention to religion in these frameworks by revising existing documents or producing religion assessment supplements.
- **Develop guidelines on religion and assessment consultations.** Religious leaders and networks can be useful interview subjects or information sources in the assessment process. Organizations in the electoral support community involved in assessment should develop guidelines for recruiting religious leaders to ensure a diverse spectrum of viewpoints is included.
- **Disseminate assessment results.** Religious leaders and networks are consumers of knowledge from the electoral support community. When assessments or observation reports are complete, organizations in the electoral support community should consider targeted dissemination through religious networks to share best practices and lay a foundation for potential future engagements.

## Engagement

- **Develop strategic religious engagement plan matched to organization priorities.** A variety of planning processes exist across the electoral support community to prepare for upcoming elections. Organizations involved in programmatic engagement should develop strategic religious engagement guidance that matches religion to the organization's broader planning process for a given election, both as a challenge and an opportunity.
- **Integrate religious engagement with broader attempts to involve civil society.** The electoral support community views civil society organizations (CSOs) as central partners in building stable democracies. In many contexts, religious organizations are woven intricately into domestic civil society. In others, ties between CSOs and religious institutions are less robust. Rather than isolating religious leaders, engagements should prioritize coalition building to maximize impact.
- **Develop a community of research practice to strengthen monitoring and evaluation (M&E).** The electoral support community should stay abreast of breaking scholarship, perhaps by convening a community of research practice, to ensure that religion-related interventions reflect rapidly developing research in this area. This would improve religion's integration into existing organizational M&E practices related to stakeholder interactions.