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# Sacred Ballots

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## Engaging with Religious Actors in the Electoral Cycle

WHITE PAPER | JUNE 2023

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## Engaging with Religious Actors in the Electoral Cycle

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International Foundation  
for Electoral Systems



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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. 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.

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.

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The paper also reflects insights from roughly 30 participants in a 2017 roundtable on this topic at the U.S. Department of State, convened by the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, as well as field interviews with roughly two dozen practitioners conducted in 2019 through the support of the University of Notre Dame's Global Religion Research Initiative.

## 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.

## Ch. 1: Rationale for the Report—Why Religion and Election Preparation?

The task of fostering resilient democracies is more important than ever. Global trends show that democracy is in decline<sup>3</sup> and that 72 percent of the world’s population lives in autocracies.<sup>4</sup> Addressing challenges to the integrity of electoral institutions remains a key aspect of confronting democratic regression. While democracy faces diverse challenges, including polarized societies, restrictive media environments, and politicized judiciaries, ample work remains to strengthen the core procedure of democratic governance: the election.

It is imperative that all those interested in electoral integrity better understand the contemporary challenges of democracy promotion and electoral assistance. To that end, the electoral support community must evaluate current approaches to assessment and intervention.

In this white paper, we propose that enhanced attention to religious dynamics in electoral assessment and engagement provides an important opportunity to rise to this challenge. The paper posits that the electoral support community can strengthen its approach to assessment and engagement by proactively evaluating religion’s impact on different phases of the electoral cycle, identifying relevant religious actors who need to be engaged, and ultimately responding to religion’s impact on electoral processes, both in generating challenges and in building electoral integrity and resilience.

Why should religion be on the agenda of the electoral support community? For much of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, analysts assumed that economic development would take religion off the world’s political agenda, a position that scholars commonly refer to as secularization theory. Since development also brings democracy, promoting democracy required little attention to religious dynamics beyond perhaps putting out sectarian fires in less wealthy countries holding elections.

The past quarter century has confounded secularization theory’s predictions. Global research from the Pew Research Center finds that more than four in five people worldwide have some sort of religious affiliation—and that the share of those with an affiliation is on the rise.<sup>5</sup> Democracies from India to Brazil to Nigeria have seen significant economic growth but little (if any) decline in religion’s political salience. Religion remains a potent force in American politics, with roughly half of Americans claiming it is essential to have a president who shares their religious beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Tensions tied to immigration and populism have “returned” religion to the public square, even in supposedly secular Europe. The two countries with the most significant improvements in Freedom House’s 2022 Freedom in the World Report (Ecuador and Côte d’Ivoire) and the two countries with the greatest declines (Myanmar and Afghanistan) all have

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<sup>3</sup> Freedom House. 2021. “New Report: The Global Decline in Democracy Has Accelerated.” Freedom House. March 3, 2021.

<https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-global-decline-democracy-has-accelerated>

<sup>4</sup> “Defiance in the Face of Autocratization.” 2023. [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem\\_democracyreport2023\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Conrad Hackett and M. Stonawski. 2017. “The Changing Global Religious Landscape.” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project. April 5, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, Travis. 2016. “Faith and the 2016 Campaign.” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project. January 27, 2016. <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/01/27/faith-and-the-2016-campaign/>

high rates of religious affiliation and politically active clergy. In the words of Peter Berger, a scholar once among secularization theory's strongest advocates, "The assumption we live in a secularized world is false ... The world today is as furiously religious as it ever was."<sup>7</sup>

Thus we argue that religion is not some exotic factor but a regular feature of electoral politics around the globe. Rather than ignoring religion, this paper takes what some call "the political ambivalence" of religion as its starting point.<sup>8</sup> Religious dynamics are at times implicated in religious, racial, and gender-identity-based exclusion; social polarization; and even political violence. However, they can also serve as a resource for promoting robust elections. In unstable democracies from Hungary to the Philippines, practitioners need guidance on responding to this ambivalence by integrating religious dynamics into their assessments and planning programmatic interventions.

One-half of the ambivalence of religion is the challenge that religious dynamics may pose to well-functioning electoral institutions. Nationalists may utilize religion to stir up support on the campaign trail, inciting violence on social media and offline or restricting access to polls for women and minorities. Not only might religion empower domestic hardliners, but it could also prove practically challenging to international actors. International governmental and NGO actors may struggle to understand local religious dynamics, feel constrained by donor-country laws that limit state involvement with religion, or be concerned about counterproductive intervention in local religious affairs.

Without minimizing these concerns, a second rationale motivates this report: Religious dynamics have been central to the consolidation of democratic institutions. Religious actors may participate in freedom struggles, peacebuilding, constitution drafting, voter registration, civic and voter education, voter mobilization, anticorruption advocacy, electoral rights promotion, or alternative dispute resolution. These initiatives may draw on the deep legitimacy that religious actors often enjoy and on values that motivate collective action. At a time when some openly question the ability of democracy to deliver for average citizens, this moral authority can be a potent contribution to building electoral integrity. Religious actors may also operate more tangibly through networks of schools, community centers, houses of worship, and media networks that bring material resources to the electoral support community, particularly in portions of a country outside of urban centers.

If carefully conceived to address this ambivalence, religious engagement could make significant and diverse contributions to promoting the resilience of electoral institutions. In a hypothetical election cycle, this could include:

- *Engaging* grassroots leaders from movements of religious women (often not considered religious leaders) in pre-electoral assessments focused on equity and poll access in the country.
- Assessing *religious framing within online hate speech* that could incite electoral violence against specific religious communities—often minority communities.
- Partnering with religious networks on *voter education* and *get-out-the-vote campaigns* designed to reach rural and isolated portions of a country with new information on voter registration and electoral procedures.

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<sup>7</sup> Berger, Peter L. 1999. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999).

<sup>8</sup> R. Scott Appleby. 2000. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict Series (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers); Philpott, Daniel. 2007. "Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion," *American Political Science Review* 101 (3): 505–25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055407070372>.

- Developing communication channels with religious development organizations equipped to carry out *early warning and response* to potential electoral violence.
- Integrating religious organizations into *post-election lessons learned exercises* to guide and advocate for future electoral reforms.
- *Monitoring and evaluating* religious engagement efforts to rigorously document these approaches' unique strengths and challenges.

## Ch. 2: Finding Religion in Current Electoral Assessments

Various frameworks, including those related to the threat of election violence, guide electoral assessments that governmental and non-governmental organizations use to plan programmatic engagements. These include the U.S. Government's Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework and more specific frameworks like the National Democratic Institute's Votes without Violence Assessment Framework, which highlights risks of violence against women in elections, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) *Violence Against Women in Elections* assessments.<sup>9</sup>

To better understand how the field currently analyzes religion in electoral assessments and election observation missions (EOMs), we conducted a meta-analysis of over a dozen publicly available evaluations and EOMs from diverse organizations in various countries and regions. While we do not claim that these represent a random sample of such assessments, trends emerge regarding how religion does (and does not) feature in their analyses.

Current electoral assessment frameworks primarily evaluate various factors related to electoral integrity, drawing on frameworks developed by good governance organizations and scholars.<sup>10</sup> IFES, for example, maintains a comprehensive practitioner Electoral Integrity Assessment methodology that maps vulnerabilities across 18 areas of the election process and prioritizes recommendations for reform. It has been implemented in several countries, including Mali.<sup>11</sup> Most of these assessments include attention to a country's election law, voter registration and education, campaign finance, electoral planning, and implementation, prospects for peace and security surrounding the election, and an evaluation of the media environment, which often includes specific attention to hate speech. Most electoral assessments pay attention to the participation status of women and minorities, but religious institutions and actors are usually mentioned peripherally, if at all. This is how religion generally appears in these assessments: lurking below the surface, alluded to but not named.

When religion does show up in the reviewed pre-electoral assessments or EOMs, it has appeared as follows:

- **Religion as demographics.** Assessment reports and EOMs regularly provide statistics about a country's religious demographics, often focusing on the number of religious minorities.
- **Religion as a source of exclusion.** Assessment reports and EOMs sometimes note that a country limits the political participation of religious minorities or women, supposedly on religious grounds.
- **Religion as a tool for political mobilization.** Assessment reports and EOMs sometimes highlight political parties organized on religious lines or candidates who utilize religious campaign rhetoric, including mobilizing based on religious identity and, at times, delivering policy priorities of religious communities.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/187786.pdf>; <https://www.ndi.org/votes-without-violence-guide>; <https://www.ifes.org/publications/violence-against-women-elections-framework>

<sup>10</sup> For instance, through the work of Pippa Norris and associated scholars. See, for example, Norris, Pippa. *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*. 2014. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>11</sup> IFES. "Mali Electoral Integrity Assessment" 2023. March 27, 2023. <https://www.ifes.org/publications/mali-electoral-integrity-assessment>

- **Religion as a source of identity cleavage (including political violence).** Assessment reports and EOMs regularly reference religion as an identity category involved in social cleavage, often alongside other features such as race, ethnicity, or language. Most pre-electoral assessments include a section on a country's peace and security dynamics, and they often refer to existing tensions based on differing religious identities. Here, religion may also show up in the previous efforts of interfaith and intercommunal organizations to promote peace across identity boundaries.

The question, then, is: If religion only appears in these ways, is our current analysis enough for practitioners and interested stakeholders to properly assess and address how religion may or may not play a role in an election cycle? Neglecting to broaden and deepen our analysis of religion in relevant pre-electoral assessments and EOMs may cause practitioners to overlook potential opportunities to promote electoral integrity. In Kenya, for example, the Inter-religious Council, the Council of Bishops, and the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya have performed a vital mediation role to promote peace and reconciliation and resolve past election-related grievances. Additionally, assessments may miss influential but non-clerical religious leaders like the Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria and the Women Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria urging Nigerians to vote for candidates peacefully and fairly.<sup>12</sup>

Limited attention to religion in assessment also makes it challenging to address another possibility: contexts where observers assume that religion is a salient political force in the electoral cycle but where its influence may, in fact, be limited. This is in keeping with Mandaville's sage guidance to "right-size" religion in diplomatic efforts moving beyond the assumption that politics "could be accurately characterized as either wholly *religious* or *irreligious* in nature."<sup>13</sup> We can see this in the case of Lebanon, where one might believe that religion and national religious actors are among the defining forces in the electoral cycle, given the sectarian nature of many political parties, but where experts contend that national-level religious elites often have limited ability to influence other "secular" elites within their sectarian communities. Right-sizing religion's importance, for good or ill, first requires a sophisticated assessment that matches expertise brought to other security, economic, or cultural topics.

In sum, while religion appears on the margins of existing assessments, significant room exists to deepen its treatment. Updating existing approaches is a crucial first step in responding to religion's role in the electoral cycle.

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<sup>12</sup> "WOWICAN and FOMWAN Advocate for a Peaceful Election." 2022. Campus Reporter. July 16, 2022. <https://campusreporter.ng/wowican-and-fomwan-advocate-for-peaceful-election/>

<sup>13</sup> 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>

## Ch. 3: Guiding Assessment Principles

How might practitioners build on the current state of the art in religion and electoral assessment? What follows are principles designed to evaluate when religion is important, how to identify religious actors, and how we should think about religion’s contextual effect in distinct settings. We intend them to complement—not replace—the existing assessment treatment of religion documented above.

An essential first step in planning for the impact of religious actors in an electoral cycle is a clear assessment of what “religion” and “religious actors” means and how these relate to other political, legal, and institutional features of a given location. While the electoral support community does not need to resolve definitional debates over religion that divide scholars, we will clearly state what dimensions of “religion” we address in this report. This section briefly provides a practical framework for disaggregating the concept of religion by highlighting *actors* and *organizations*. We then discuss several contextual variables that shape the electoral role of religion. Sound assessment then gives a foundation for engaging with religious actors and dynamics toward genuine, credible, inclusive, and safe elections.

Ultimately, these principles could generate an assessment framework to guide election observers, EMBs, election technical assistance providers, or other stakeholders in evaluating potential challenges and opportunities religion poses across the election cycle. In practice, the electoral support community could incorporate religious dynamics into assessments at various intensity levels, ranging from conducting significant field research to a lighter-touch approach that draws on scholarly expertise.

### 3.1. “Religion” in the Context of Elections: Highlighting Actors and Organizations

Defining “religion” is a contentious process. The term may refer to anything from beliefs to ritual practices, communities, and authority structures. In the interest of clarity, this report will focus on two dimensions of religion relevant to the election process: 1) actors, both those claiming to speak for religion and those exercising *de facto* religious leadership without claims to formal religious authority; and 2) organizations that represent religion’s collective institutional presence.

“Religious actors” in this paper refers broadly to individuals who shape the election process via actions claimed to be based on or associated with religion. This may sometimes refer to official clerical leaders such as the lead monk in a local monastery or an international hierarch like the Pope. But religious actors should be defined much more broadly in assessing electoral impact. Women’s networks, youth groups, and even social media personalities may be crucial religious actors in a given context.<sup>14</sup> Broadening our understanding of religious actors to include these non-traditional individuals and groups will provide pre-electoral assessments and EOMs with a fuller, more in-depth perspective of the religious dynamics in a country, whom to engage with, and how to engage with them.

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<sup>14</sup> To be clear, women and youth can at times hold positions of formal religious authority. The Superior of a Catholic women’s order in the Philippines, a fully ordained Buddhist nun in Sri Lanka, a female sharia court judge in Palestine, and a woman Bishop in the Anglican Church of Kenya would all represent formal religious authorities. We thank Susie Hayward for this important clarification.

Assessment efforts should track religious actors and consider their moral authority, level of interest, and history of engagement in electoral matters. Scholars and practitioners commonly note the unique legitimacy that religious groups bring to public affairs, especially when they can claim to represent the “common good” in public life. Indeed, this credibility is a powerful resource. However, it is also “a brittle resource,” and so assessment should include attention to the extent to which it exists.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, assessment should include awareness of whether religious actors are enthusiastic, hesitant, or even resistant to involvement in previous efforts to promote high-quality elections.

In contrast to individual actors, religion commonly has collective forms, which we call religious organizations. Although many pre-electoral assessment frameworks evaluate civil society groups, they provide an incomplete picture of how these may relate to formal or informal religious organization and infrastructure. The most obvious example may be religious congregations, which are sometimes at the center of election preparation efforts. However, religious organizations could also include networks of schools, community centers, public health clinics, business associations, and even religious media networks. Assessing the diverse organizational forms of religion is essential to evaluate potential electoral engagements successfully. Organizational capacity, particularly in rural and impoverished urban areas, is one significant opportunity for potential partnership in election preparation.

Beyond documenting the existence of religious organizations, assessment should involve attention to their capacity as well, according to diverse metrics. Do organizations reach all portions of a country? Do they regularly mobilize significant numbers of volunteers? Do they have regular means of communication with their networks, whether in person or virtually? And how, if at all, has this capacity been involved in governance work related to recent election campaigns? Assessments must acknowledge that not all organizational efforts are likely to have been successful. For instance, while religious organizations have been active in Kenya’s recent elections, analysts noted they generally failed to mobilize against the country’s 2007–08 electoral violence.<sup>16</sup>

Whether evaluating actors or organizations, assessment should also include attention to the relevant intra- and inter-religious (or intra- and inter-faith) dynamics in a country. In some settings, NGOs such as Sri Lanka’s National Peace Council may exist whose official missions center on promoting interreligious understanding. In other contexts, religious leaders might participate alongside secular organizations in good governance coalitions—for instance, Senegal’s *Conseil des Organisation Non-Gouvernementales d’Appui au Développement*. Assessment should involve evaluating the activity of such networks related to promoting electoral integrity and histories of interreligious violence. Assessment should not lose sight of cleavages within a seemingly unified religious community. Such intrareligious tensions can become a source of electoral exclusion and even violence.

Whether because of their religious backgrounds or the relatively elite nature of their work, election assessment teams may assume that the heads of religious organizations should be the first (and perhaps only) actors consulted in analysis efforts. While the (often older and male) heads of religious organizations may be important points of contact, practitioners should not stop there.

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<sup>15</sup> This phrasing draws on the research of Anna Maria Grzymała-Busse. 2015. *Nations under God: How Churches Use Moral Authority to Influence Policy*. Princeton, New Jersey and Oxford, England: Princeton University Press.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Haider, Huma. 2016. “Religious Leaders and the Prevention of Electoral Violence.” In GSDRC Helpdesk Research Reports. Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.  
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a9c982e5274a0f6c000004/HDQ1366.pdf>



In particular, activity patterns related to elections among women's religious groups and students or youth may occur mainly outside official religious hierarchies. Nuns from Catholic women's religious orders were on the frontlines of the 1986 People Power protests that restored democracy in the Philippines, and they remain at the forefront of effective electoral activism in the country. Young interfaith activists played a prominent part in pro-democracy protests after the military coup in Myanmar in 2021.<sup>17</sup> Social media may empower a new cohort of actors making religious claims regarding free and fair elections, for instance, the rapid growth of the #ThisFlag campaign in Zimbabwe based on the social media presence of Pastor Evan Mawarire.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of assessing actors outside of traditional religious hierarchies may also have a darker side. In an age of social media, online hate speech designed to ignite sectarianism may draw on religious images and motivations but originate outside official religious organizations. For example, religious imagery and slogans were deeply embedded in conspiratorial online networks that fueled the violence at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021.<sup>19</sup> And there should be no general assumption that younger religious leaders are more likely to strongly support liberal democracy. For example, some younger monks have been leaders in stoking sectarian tensions in Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

To be clear, it *may* be the case that official members of a religious hierarchy have a vital role in election season. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, the official organization of the Catholic bishops, known as the *Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo*, played a very active role in recent elections, first attempting to mediate between President Joseph Kabila and various opposition parties and then addressing the credibility of elections that brought President Felix Tshisekedi to power. But practitioners should be aware that religion's impact on elections may operate through very different channels of religious authority.

## 3.2. Religion in Context

Along with analysis of religious actors and organizations relevant to the election cycle, pre-electoral assessments should account for religion's political, social, and legal context. These contextual factors may vary widely across contexts, but several stand out across cases.

### Religion-State Relationships

At a minimum, those conducting assessments should evaluate the *extent* of cooperation between state and religious actors in the implementation country and the *equality* of treatment of various religious communities, particularly religious minorities. The legal relationship between religion and state may influence the legal process of registering religious charities or may restrict clerics holding office or candidates' use of religion on the campaign trail. For example, Thailand's Constitution prohibits Buddhist monks, novices, ascetics, and priests from exercising the right to vote.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "Myanmar Protesters Bridge Religious Divides to Counter Military Coup." 2021. Christian Science Monitor. March 26, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> See, for background, the National Endowment for Democracy's profile of Mawarire: <https://www.ned.org/fellows/evan-mawarire/>

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, evidence gathered through the Uncivil Religion project: <https://uncivilreligion.org/home/index>

<sup>20</sup> Constitution of Thailand, Chapter VII, Article 96.

Assessments should also be attentive to the legal context in relevant donor countries. The U.S. Government remains a significant donor to electoral integrity abroad. Still, it has a relatively uncommon set of restrictions on funding religious organizations due to interpretations of its Constitution's Establishment Clause. European donors to democracy work operate in very different legal environments that sometimes facilitate funding religious institutions. Understanding these donor contexts is essential if an assessment is meant to inform an approach to programmatic spending involving governmental funds.

## Religion and Political Actors

Ties between religion and political parties can dramatically impact the role of religion in the electoral cycle and potential partnerships with religious actors in preparation for the election. Pre-election assessments can focus on the behavior of parties and religious elites, as well as policy priorities salient to religious communities.<sup>21</sup> Do parties or candidates define themselves in explicitly religious terms, conduct outreach to one or more religious communities, or make financial or policy commitments to religious communities on the campaign trail? Do religious elites endorse election candidates, fund campaigns, run for office themselves, or offer policy guidance on voting choices? Do institutions, such as federated governance or quotas, have the effect of reserving certain offices along religious lines or encouraging party formation along sectarian lines?

## Religion and Social Inclusion or Exclusion

Religious identity also has a complicated relationship with inclusion, including based on race, sex, and sexuality. Religious and political actors may use religious beliefs to restrict the participation of women, LGBTQI+ people, and racial or religious minorities in elections. For example, in India and some South Asian countries, Dalits' electoral and political participation is significantly hampered even when protections are provided by law.<sup>22</sup> In Pakistan, there are barriers for members of the Ahmadiyya community to accessing the electoral process.<sup>23</sup> If religious norms play a part in barriers to electoral participation, including potential violence, it is crucial for pre-election assessment to account for this dynamic. To give one example, an IFES assessment in Zimbabwe identified local interpretations of Christianity as one source of gender-based electoral restrictions in the country.<sup>24</sup> In addition, assessments should evaluate religious actors or institutions prioritizing more inclusive participation. For instance, Muslim religious leaders in Afghanistan issued *fatwas* (edicts) in favor of women's political participation in the 2004 elections.

## Religion and Security

Religious rhetoric is sometimes used to "other" and incite election violence against groups. Religious language is also used to intimidate and harass women running for office. Beyond assessing inter- or intrareligious violence, pre-

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<sup>21</sup> Salient policy priorities could vary widely, from issues typically tied to religious voting in the United States, like gender and sexuality, to issues as diverse as proposed economic reforms or constitutional revisions.

<sup>22</sup> IFES. "Dalit Experiences with Electoral Processes: Evidence from a Multi-National Survey." 2023. <https://www.ifes.org/dalit-experiences-electoral-processes-evidence-multi-national-survey>

<sup>23</sup> "Pakistan - United States Department of State." 2022. United States Department of State. June 2, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.ifes.org/publications/new-assessment-violence-against-women-elections-zimbabwe>

election assessment should include attention to the relationship between religion and security services, which may become relevant to election violence prevention. Are security services representative of various religious communities? Have actors claiming to represent religious communities received or inflicted violence on the military, police, or national guard, or vice versa? Are there strong elite ties between religious leaders and heads of security services?

## **Religion and the Economy**

Religion may be considered a spiritual force, but it is also frequently tied to material patterns in an economy that can impact the election cycle. Are religious communities concentrated in parts of the country that affect their economic base by involving them heavily in agriculture in rural parts of the country? Is religion correlated with socioeconomic status? If such ties exist, religion could become tied to challenges in voter registration or poll access.

## **Religion and International Influence**

Many religious communities stretch across state borders, so assessing religion's influence on domestic elections frequently requires a global perspective. International ties may be an important resource for strengthening democracy, as co-religionists abroad can lend both symbolic and financial support to local campaigners. However, international ties may also raise tensions related to religion and democracy. International anti-Semitic and Islamophobic networks are increasingly mobilized to support right-wing parties challenging consolidated democracies. And funding from wealthy Muslim-majority states has long been tied to the spread of ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam in other portions of the Muslim world.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Peter Mandaville. 2022. *Wahhabism and the World: Understanding Saudi Arabia's Global Influence on Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Ch. 4: Opportunities and Considerations for Engagement

After assessing the religious dynamics in a particular case, the electoral support community may have an interest in developing an engagement or intervention strategy. While there has been little systematic research on religious engagement in the electoral cycle, religious actors are, in practice, already involved in a wide variety of initiatives. Below we present illustrative examples drawn from a variety of regional settings and diverse stages of the electoral cycle. While we do not attempt to set out a systematic list of best practices or argue that engagement is always appropriate, there is ample evidence of diverse paths of engagement across the election cycle.

In all phases of the electoral cycle, programmatic planning should be attentive to maintaining and, where possible, strengthening ties across religious and social cleavages. Evidence points to early confidence-building measures between religious and secular activists in Tunisia, for instance, as essential to stabilizing that country's Arab Spring transition.<sup>26</sup> As noted above, such cleavages may exist within, as well as between, religious traditions. Maintaining ties by involving diverse religious actors in pre-election planning, such as diverse networks like Sierra Leone's Inter-Religious Council, may be particularly effective.

### 4.1. Pre-election Period

In the earliest stages, religion may contribute crucial information to pre-electoral assessments. Religious actors can serve as valuable information sources in the data collection process. Furthermore, because religious infrastructure is frequently strong in rural and impoverished communities, religious institutions may offer uniquely valuable data in the assessment process. In some cases—notably a comprehensive assessment of peace and governance conducted by Catholic Relief Services for the Catholic Bishops Conference of Liberia—religious organizations may actually be the ones to carry out the assessment.<sup>27</sup> In other cases, multinational organizations may collaborate with local religious networks for similar assessments—for example, International IDEA's collaboration with the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy on the *State of Local Democracy in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (SoLD ARMM)* report from 2013.<sup>28</sup> Partnerships may also involve religiously-affiliated CSOs and scholars focused on the sources of high-quality governance, as in studies of “vote-buying” in the Philippines.<sup>29</sup>

As the pre-election period moves beyond assessment to programmatic response, religious engagement can be loosely grouped into two categories. In the first category, religious actors play a part in *high-level planning* in the early stages of an electoral cycle. In the second, religious institutions play a role in *grassroots outreach* to engage and mobilize citizens.

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<sup>26</sup> Stepan, Alfred. 2012. "Tunisia's Transition and the Twin Tolerations," *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 2.

<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/tunisias-transition-and-the-twin-tolerations/>

<sup>27</sup> "State of Peace, Reconciliation and Conflict in Liberia." 2016. Catholic Relief Services. December 20, 2016. <https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/state-peace-reconciliation-and-conflict-liberia>

<sup>28</sup> Co, Edna, Ramon Fernan, Maria Faina, L. Diola, et al. n.d. "State of Local Democracy in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (SoLD ARMM)." <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/state-of-local-democracy-autonomous-region-muslim-mindanao.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/combating-vote-selling-philippines>

At a high level, religious actors are frequently involved in mediation efforts between political factions, particularly before potentially divisive elections. Religious actors have been involved in a number of mediation efforts between incumbents and opposition in Latin America in the past quarter century.<sup>30</sup> Leaders organized as the Interfaith Peace Platform in the Central Africa Republic have been central to elite mediation efforts before that country's recent elections, including attracting a visit from Pope Francis in 2014. The *Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo*, which represents the official hierarchy of the Catholic Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo, was central to a series of mediation efforts between the political opposition and President Joseph Kabila in the run-up to elections that eventually took place in late 2018. Religious elites may also lend credibility to technical aspects of election preparation. The Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), a religious network of domestic election observers in the Philippines, served as an observer to the contentious procurement process for the first automated vote-counting machines in the country.<sup>31</sup>

Religious concerns may also be reflected in candidate codes of conduct—for instance, India's Model Code of Conduct restricting the use of caste or religion during an election campaign. Religious actors may serve as conveners of candidate fora designed to promote peaceful conduct and disseminate information about candidates. Ghana's National Peace Council succeeded in gathering all presidential candidates to publicly commit to peaceful elections in 2016 amid concerns over potential electoral violence.<sup>32</sup> Malawi's 2014 Lilongwe Peace Declaration brought a similar approach.<sup>33</sup> In the Philippines, the evangelical VoteNet initiative brought presidential candidates together for a nationally televised candidate forum in 2010, focused on candidate character and integrity.

In addition to these elite engagements, religious institutions are common contributors to grassroots outreach and mobilization in the pre-election period. Various forms of voter and civic education are the most common examples of this engagement. For instance, citizenship trainings developed by *Simbahang Lingkod ng Bayan*, the social action arm of the Jesuit community in the Philippines, were then deployed throughout the country through congregations. Some of this education and outreach may be fairly technical in nature. For instance, religious networks were crucial in disseminating the new standards as the Philippines required new biometric information for voter registration. In Timor-Leste, religious institutions played an important role in identity verification when registration records were scarce in the post-conflict environment. Similarly, the international Sant'Egidio religious community has worked closely with several governments in sub-Saharan Africa on improving birth registration, a topic relevant to voter registration.

At the same time, civic education by religious institutions regularly attempts not only to convey technical information but also to draw on religious values to motivate action. PPCRV voter education manuals for the 2016 Philippine election provided technical information about the mechanics of elections alongside primers in Catholic social teaching and prayers for clean elections. Elections experts may appear alongside clergy at congregation-based training

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<sup>30</sup> Betances, Emelio. 2004. "The Catholic Church and Political Mediation in the Dominican Republic: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Church and State* 46 (2): 341–64. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/46.2.341>

<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that the involvement of religious elites is no guarantee of avoiding controversy. The procurement of automated count machines from Smartmatic was highly controversial, including among religious elites in the Philippines, with some Catholic bishops sharply critical of the PPCRV's endorsement of the EMB's decision.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.peacecouncil.gov.gh/storage/2019/09/National-Peace-Council-Evaluation-Report-pub-October-2017.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> "Taking a Stand Against Electoral Violence in Malawi." 2014. [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MW\\_140510\\_LilongwePeaceDeclaration.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MW_140510_LilongwePeaceDeclaration.pdf)

events, with religious authorities providing credible moral messengers while civil society representatives provide technical details on election procedures. While religious actors are free to use their own religious traditions and values in civic education, it is important that the electoral support community consider all religious communities in engagements and that it incorporates principles of diversity and equity into official materials.

Much of this voter education occurs via physical religious infrastructure, but religious institutions may also have unique access to various forms of media. Religious radio networks in South Sudan have proven essential in providing information in local languages regarding elections to dispersed populations in a context of low state capacity. And even mainstream, non-religious media may enthusiastically give airtime to religious campaigners in contexts of highly popular religiosity.

One issue that combines technical voter education with moral messaging is combatting corruption and vote-buying in the period leading up to elections. While religious actors are certainly not immune to charges of corruption, there are numerous examples of religious networks mobilizing as part of anti-corruption campaigns around election season. The PPCRV's 2016 One Good Vote education campaign focused heavily on resisting vote-buying in the Philippines, including proposals to have "roving public address systems" condemn vote-buying around the parish community in the weeks leading to the election. While the March 12 Movement for good governance in Sri Lanka was not explicitly religious, it involved significant involvement from faith leaders and centered its campaign on combatting bribery and corruption. This area also illustrates the need for added M&E in this area, discussed below. There is at least some evidence that certain anti-vote buying strategies advocated by Filipino religious leaders are of questionable effect.<sup>34</sup>

Ensuring inclusive participation in elections is among the enduring challenges in the pre-election period. Religion may sometimes be a source of exclusion, but several examples highlight creative responses from the electoral support community that can involve religious actors in ameliorating these challenges. Eliminating Yemen's policy requiring retaining photographs of veiled women correlated to more than doubling the female registration rate in the country.<sup>35</sup> In the Philippines, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) worked closely with religious networks to reduce obstacles faced by persons with disabilities and Indigenous communities, who have longstanding relationships with religious charitable networks in the country. IFES has worked with the Electoral Commission of Nepal to provide voter education to hundreds of thousands of Dalits in the country, working closely with community leaders.<sup>36</sup> And the National Democratic Institute has made an effort to "mainstream LGBT inclusion" by integrating LGBT groups in broader good governance coalitions in Turkey that include religious conservatives.<sup>37</sup>

We close this section by mentioning a final issue of emerging importance to the electoral support community: the use of disinformation and hate speech during elections, particularly online in the campaign period. Disinformation and violent social media messages have been deployed in the campaign period in many places, including Mexico, Kenya, and Myanmar, with the latter tied to religion and having severe consequences for the Rohingya minority in the country. Religion may sometimes play a part in the spread of online disinformation. For example, Armaly, Buckley, and Enders

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<sup>34</sup> Hicken, Allen, Stephen Leider, Nico Ravanilla, and Dean Yang. 2018. "Temptation in Vote-Selling: Evidence from a Field Experiment in the Philippines." *Journal of Development Economics* 131 (March): 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdevco.2017.10.012>

<sup>35</sup> "Identification of Voters Wearing a Veil —." N.d. <https://aceproject.org/electoral-advice/archive/questions/replies/419301685>

<sup>36</sup> [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes\\_brochure\\_underrepresented\\_populations\\_0.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_brochure_underrepresented_populations_0.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> "How Does LGBT Inclusion Fit within NDI's Mission?" n.d. [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Civic\\_Update\\_Jan\\_2014.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Civic_Update_Jan_2014.pdf)

(2022) document how links between conspiratorial information sources and white Christian nationalism in the United States built support for the attacks on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.<sup>38</sup> Scholars have also conducted extensive recent research tying religion to online disinformation connected to the COVID-19 pandemic—for instance, the work of Alimardani and Elswah (2020) in the Middle East.<sup>39</sup> Electoral organizations focusing on disinformation would be wise to integrate religion into their assessments of the origins and effects of that information.

As the electoral support community develops non-regulatory responses to online disinformation in collaboration with state and non-state actors, some illustrative efforts suggest that there is room for strategic engagement with religious leaders.<sup>40</sup> For example, Haque et al. (2020) find that collaborating with religious leaders in Bangladesh could prove an effective strategy in combatting misinformation that has led to sectarian election violence in that country.<sup>41</sup> Religious authorities launched a “Fake News, Religion and Politics” program in Brazil through nationwide religious communication networks focused on democracy and election verification.<sup>42</sup> In the Philippines, religious leaders joined with media, civil society, and business leaders to launch #FactsFirstPH before the country’s 2022 polls.<sup>43</sup>

## 4.2. Election Period

Religious institutions’ most visible involvement in the electoral cycle occurs during the election period, specifically on Election Day itself—especially via the involvement of religious networks in domestic citizen monitoring. The Philippines’ ground-breaking National Citizens’ Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) has been closely tied to religious actors since its inception in the mid-1980s, recruiting from Christian clergy as well as networks of Muslim elites, particularly in portions of the island of Mindanao. These days, a second domestic citizen monitoring group, the PPCRV, more uniquely tied to the country’s Roman Catholic majority, regularly mobilizes hundreds of thousands of monitors across the country. This exemplifies a much broader set of cases that see similar cooperation between domestic observers and religious networks—*Observatorio da Igreja Para Os Assuntos Sociais* (Timor-Leste), *Caritas* (Papua New Guinea), Malawi Electoral Support Network (Malawi), and others. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace has also done significant election-related work in Southern Africa, including Zimbabwe. In the lead-up to the 2022 national elections, the Council of Churches of Papua New Guinea, in collaboration with the Papua New Guinea Election Commission and IFES, developed a civic education video that was distributed nationwide, urging leaders and voters to uphold the Constitution, guard the integrity of elections, address violence against women and girls, and participate in the elections.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Armaly, Miles T., David T. Buckley, and Adam M. Enders. 2022. “Christian Nationalism and Political Violence: Victimhood, Racial Identity, Conspiracy, and Support for the Capitol Attacks.” *Political Behavior* 44 (2): 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09758-y>

<sup>39</sup> Alimardani, Mahsa, and Mona Elswah. 2020. “Online Temptations: COVID-19 and Religious Misinformation in the MENA Region.” *Social Media+ Society* 6 (3): 205630512094825. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948251>

<sup>40</sup> IFES. “Countering Hate Speech in Elections: Strategies for Electoral Management Bodies.” 2023. May 18, 2023. <https://www.ifes.org/publications/countering-hate-speech-elections-strategies-electoral-management-bodies>

<sup>41</sup> Haque, Md Mahfuzul, Mohammad Yousuf, Ahmed Shatil Alam, Pratyasha Saha, Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed, and Naeemul Hassan. 2020. “Combating Misinformation in Bangladesh: Roles and Responsibilities as Perceived by Journalists, Fact-Checkers, and Users.” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 4, (CSCW2): 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3415201>

<sup>42</sup> Fides, Agenzia. n.d. “AMERICA/BRAZIL - ‘Fake News, Religion and Politics’: Online Course to Combat Disinformation and Strengthen the Commitment to Truth - Agenzia Fides.” [www.fides.org](http://www.fides.org). [http://www.fides.org/en/news/72563-AMERICA\\_BRAZIL\\_Fake\\_news\\_religion\\_and\\_politics\\_online\\_course\\_to\\_combat\\_disinformation\\_and\\_strengthen\\_the\\_commitment\\_to\\_truth](http://www.fides.org/en/news/72563-AMERICA_BRAZIL_Fake_news_religion_and_politics_online_course_to_combat_disinformation_and_strengthen_the_commitment_to_truth)

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, <https://factsfirst.ph/members#list-of-orgs>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vv3otefzJ-4>

Religion's importance in the election period may show not only through volunteer recruitment for domestic observation but also in the infrastructure for voting verification. The national headquarters for NAMFREL's crucial 1986 quick count was at De La Salle University, a prominent Catholic higher education institution. Religious networks there have also been closely tied to the domestic legal network that observes the canvassing stage of the vote count—the Legal Network for Truthful Elections—with recruitment taking place in part through Catholic law schools and the Catholic Bishop's Conference of the Philippines' network of social action centers. In some settings, from Indonesia to the United States, churches, mosques, and other houses of worship have been used as polling places. While common, this pattern is not universally recommended as a best practice. Assessment could indicate that the nature of religious divisions in a country would mean that turning to houses of worship for election infrastructure could result in exclusion.

In contentious elections, these domestic observers and verification processes may play an important part in the perceived legitimacy of results. NAMFREL's work famously led the Philippines' Catholic bishops to denounce Ferdinand Marcos's 1986 snap election results when the domestic observers' count could not verify government reporting. This can, of course, be contentious work. The Democratic Republic of Congo's EMB, Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante, clashed with the Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Congo (the country's Catholic bishops) when the bishops questioned the results of the 2019 election based on its network of 40,000 domestic observers.

While the electoral support community works for free and fair elections, the threat of election violence remains real in various settings. As discussed in the next section, electoral competition may inflame sectarian tensions, and violence may occur along religious lines. While completely addressing the sources of sectarian violence requires longer-term attention, the electoral support community has become increasingly well-versed in the importance of early warning and response in limiting potential violence during the election period.

Religious networks are frequently involved in these monitoring efforts. They can be especially useful where they blend grassroots infrastructure with national connectivity, as in Ghana's National Peace Council and the Chisankho 2019 digital platform in Malawi. Early warning and response programs can draw on religious actors for effective grassroots networks, training of monitors in the pre-election period, monitoring on Election Day itself, and community-based intervention when risks of violence increase significantly. And, at the intersection of violence and hate speech, the leadership of Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, brought a "big boost" to the fight against online hate speech in advance of the 2018–19 elections with a recommendation that such activity "be considered a disgraceful act that must be deemed *haram* under all circumstances."<sup>45</sup>

Finally, in addition to monitoring potential election violence, religious networks may mediate grassroots conflicts related to election results. Religious actors' involvement in forms of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) at various levels of government may be especially important in contexts where judiciaries are weak or overburdened and official electoral dispute resolution mechanisms unlikely to deliver credible or timely responses that can limit violence. Grassroots conflict management panels in Kenya, developed in partnership with the Electoral Institute for Sustainable

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<sup>45</sup> The Jakarta Post Editorial. November 28, 2017. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2017/11/28/editorial-countering-hate-speech.html>



Democracy in Africa, drew on widely respected personalities at the regional and national levels, including many religious leaders, to monitor and then mitigate electoral conflict in the country after the violence of 2007.<sup>46</sup> ADR is likely to be particularly useful to practitioners in contexts where pre-existing traditions of mediation exist in local cultures.

### 4.3. Post-election Period

After votes have been counted and verified, the post-election period offers opportunities to evaluate the success of the electoral cycle to that point and offer reforms moving forward. Much of this work may occur within the EMB or via the legislature if legal reform is needed. However, religious actors can have a part to play at this stage of the cycle as well, largely building on their work in earlier stages of the process.

If religious networks in a given context are heavily involved in voter education and domestic monitoring, they are likely sources for post-election reports that evaluate the election cycle. In the Philippines, the PPCRV's 2016 post-election report, for instance, documented a range of successes and obstacles in the election period, including incidents of election violence, technical challenges with vote counting machines, and limitations placed on poll observers. While the ultimate responsibility for reform rests with the appropriate branch of government and/or the EMB, religious networks can be useful contributors to this type of post-election evaluation.

The post-election period may also be an important time to evaluate lessons learned or obstacles to equal access in the country and adopt reforms needed to increase access in the future. Post-election lessons-learned exercises, often organized by the EMB, could involve input from relevant religious actors and networks. Similarly, domestic monitoring groups may include particular attention to obstacles faced by persons with disabilities, older voters, or Indigenous persons. These sectors may interact with religious charitable networks, thus increasing the relevance of religious engagement in planning for future improvements to the registration and voting process.

### 4.4. Monitoring and Evaluation

Once engagements and interventions are implemented, the natural question is how well those measures work. Various forms of M&E are now standard practice in the electoral support community. However, in our assessment, M&E related explicitly to religious engagement lags behind other areas in this field. We believe that robust evaluation is essential to demonstrating the value added by religious engagement and avoiding potential missteps in programmatic engagement. As an initial step in addressing the existing shortfall, we propose three steps.

First, secular organizations in the electoral support community should engage in extended, early conversations with potential religious partners about assessment standards and processes. This early M&E planning may help to ensure the high-quality data needed for a successful evaluation. Ruark et al. (2019), for instance, find that M&E related to faith-based health programs in rural settings in Kenya struggled: "Religious leaders were often unable to use electronic reporting tools designed for mobile phones (via Internet or SMS) because they lacked funds to purchase

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<sup>46</sup> EISA. "Past Offices." n.d. <https://www.eisa.org.za/kenconflict.php>

data for their phones and also required training in the use of these electronic tools.”<sup>47</sup> Moreover, practitioners in the development world highlight the distinct standards for programmatic effectiveness that religious actors may adopt. Check et al. (2020) write about efforts to develop “Christ-centered Monitoring and Evaluation” among some Christian development organizations.<sup>48</sup> As Seiple et al. (2021) note, “Whatever one’s opinion of the theology, clearly [this] is a separate filter for monitoring and evaluation not found in traditional social science.”<sup>49</sup>

Second, M&E experts in the electoral support community may benefit from building relationships with experts in religion and development assessment, which has expanded significantly in the past two decades. Faith-based organizations like the Accord Network and more secular convenors like the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities have built a comparatively deep bench of expertise in M&E related to religion’s involvement in development challenges like public health and disaster response. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has hosted “evidence summits” on religion and development several times in recent years, which contain extended attention to M&E and religion but see relatively limited involvement from the electoral support community.<sup>50</sup>

Third, while comparatively little programmatic M&E has taken place related to religion and election integrity, recent academic research can offer guidance as electoral organizations move forward in this area. For example, McClendon and Riedl (2015) use an experimental research design to demonstrate the effects of sermon content on civic participation in Kenya.<sup>51</sup> Audette et al. (2020) demonstrate links between religious affiliation and civic participation across Latin America.<sup>52</sup> These results suggest some empirical grounding to the expectation that forms of religion may encourage the type of political participation that the electoral support community promotes.

However, other recent research suggests the need to question assumptions about how religious messages may impact citizens. In a field experiment, Cheeseman and Peiffer (2021) found that exposure to religious anti-bribery campaigns increased some Nigerians’ willingness to pay a bribe.<sup>53</sup> Sperber et al. (2022) found that religious messages stressing a need to work for the common good have little effect on civic behavior, although those cuing self-efficacy did.<sup>54</sup> These and other research findings suggest that the electoral support community should stay abreast of breaking scholarship, perhaps even convening a community of research practice, to ensure that religion-related interventions reflect rapidly developing research in this area.

<sup>47</sup> Ruark, Allison, Jane Kishoyian, Mona Bormet, and Douglas Huber. 2019. “Increasing Family Planning Access in Kenya through Engagement of Faith-Based Health Facilities, Religious Leaders, and Community Health Volunteers.” *Global Health: Science and Practice* 7 (3): 478-90. <https://doi.org/10.9745/GHSP-D-19-00107>

<sup>48</sup> Check, Kristen, Rodney Green, and Subodh Kumar. 2020. “Toward Laying the Foundation for Christ-Centered Monitoring & Evaluation.” *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy: The Journal of the Accord Network* 1 (2): 61–69. <https://crdajournal.org/index.php/crda/article/view/417>

<sup>49</sup> Seiple, Chris, Katherine Marshall, Hugo Slim, and Sudipta Roy. 2021. “Strategic Religious Engagement in International Development: Building a Basic Baseline.” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 19 (sub1): 1-11: Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1983360>

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, the agenda for the 2022 Evidence Summit at <https://events.zoom.us/j/91760003055421001398>

<sup>51</sup> McClendon, Gwyneth, and Rachel Beatty Riedl. “Religion as a Stimulant of Political Participation: Experimental Evidence from Nairobi, Kenya.” *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 4 (2015): 1045-57.

<sup>52</sup> Audette, Andre P., Mark Brockway, and Rodrigo Castro Cornejo. 2020. “Religious Engagement, Civic Skills, and Political Participation in Latin America.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59 (1). March 1, 2020: 101–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12642>

<sup>53</sup> Cheeseman, Nic, and Caryn Peiffer. 2021. “The Curse of Good Intentions: Why Anticorruption Messaging Can Encourage Bribery.” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 3 (2022): 1081-95. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055421001398>

<sup>54</sup> Sperber, Elizabeth, O’Brien Kaaba, and Gwyneth McClendon. 2022. “Increasing Youth Political Engagement with Efficacy Not Obligation: Evidence from a Workshop-Based Experiment in Zambia.” *Political Behavior* 44, (4) (2022/12/01 2022): 1933-58. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09794-2>

## The Question of Religious “Neutrality”

Practitioner consultations that grounded this report included debate over the importance of religious actors being seen as neutral or impartial among political candidates or parties. What degree of genuine and perceived neutrality do religious actors need to serve as effective partners in election planning, particularly in multi-religious societies?

Election stakeholders, especially those from countries that place legal limits on religious groups campaigning or endorsing candidates for office, might assume that neutrality from religious leaders *should* be expected as a condition of engagement. However, neutrality is neither necessary nor sufficient to play some role in strengthening electoral institutions. Religious leaders may speak out in favor of civil liberties and electoral transparency in ways that bring them into conflict with political incumbents but contribute to electoral integrity, as with Senegal’s tumultuous 2012 election. Certain clerics may issue statements that seem to question the suitability of a particular candidate, as was the case with the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines in the run-up to President Rodrigo Duterte’s election in 2016,<sup>55</sup> while lay networks in the same country continue to work impartially to carry out voter education.

As stated in this report’s assessment section, as a first step, it is essential that the electoral support community assess the relationships between religious and political actors as a precursor to launching any potential engagement. We suspect that the importance of neutrality may vary significantly depending on both the political context and the goals of those considering an engagement. There may be particular goals—for instance, mediating with hardline politicians—that are most likely met by religious actors who are not entirely neutral. Other functions—e.g., serving on an EMB or organizing large-scale citizen election monitoring—require much more impartiality from religious actors to ensure public credibility. It may be especially problematic, for example, when an individual cleric *servicing on the EMB* endorses a candidate, as happened before Timor-Leste’s 2007 election.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> MIDASPLAY. n.d. “Midasplay by 7midas - Slot Online Gacor #1 Pasti Bayar.” <http://www.cbcnews.com/cbcnews/?p=76681>

<sup>56</sup> “Preview of the 2007 East Timor Presidential Elections | Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability.” 2007. Nautilus.org. April 5, 2007. <https://nautilus.org/apsnet/preview-of-the-2007-east-timor-presidential-elections/>

## Considering Limits and Unintended Consequences

While there are significant opportunities for engagement between the electoral support community and religious organizations, it is also important to consider potential sources of (perhaps unintended) adverse outcomes from engagement. Three stand out for consideration: the role of the election planning community in the *content* of religious engagements, the potential for engagement to alter local religious dynamics in undesirable ways, and religious leaders' hesitation in engaging in election-related work.

First, should the electoral support community try to influence which religious messages partner organizations deploy? What happens if the norms that motivate religious partners seem problematic to partners in the election planning community? How should donors respond, for example, if a religiously inspired CSO develops candidate evaluation materials that promote honesty but also favor candidates who have faith in God? To what extent should the electoral support community attempt input into the content of the messages delivered in those communities?

A second area for caution is the possibility that engaging religious actors could alter local religious dynamics in ways that undermine engagement goals. Particularly if engagement involves the commitment of significant donor resources to religious charities or non-profits, partnerships could stoke rivalry among religious actors in society. It is also possible that partnerships with donors—particularly international groups—may delegitimize local religious partners or open them to repression from incumbent political powers.

Third, religious actors may hesitate to respond even if members of the electoral support community propose engagements. This could be because they understand that such initiatives could undermine their local moral authority. Local religious institutions may also find the processes of writing proposals and managing grants unfamiliar or burdensome. And some religious actors may simply choose not to prioritize work to strengthen electoral integrity due to other organizational priorities or even disillusionment with the democratic process.

Organizations considering engagements should be aware of these challenges, incorporating risk calculations into decisions about appropriate engagement strategy in a given electoral environment. Strong relationships with religious actors, formed early in the election cycle, can help all involved to understand priorities and sensitivities. We concur with a recent United States Institute of Peace report's conclusion: "In most cases, governments have no standing in the eyes of many believers to make pronouncements in matters of religion."<sup>57</sup> The electoral support community should exercise a minimal role in dictating the content of local messages beyond assuring that they align with the general goals of promoting electoral integrity.

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<sup>57</sup> Mandaville, Peter, and Melissa Nozell. "Engaging Religion and Religious Actors in Countering Violent Extremism." 2017. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/08/engaging-religion-and-religious-actors-countering-violent-extremism>

## Ch. 5: Recommendations for Potential Practitioner Responses

Accounting for religion more thoroughly in electoral support organizations could involve several practical steps. Here we propose several, grouped into three categories: general interest, those focused on assessment, and those focused on engagement. Rather than spotlighting particular engagement examples as best practices, this recommendation section attempts to set out a flexible approach that could generate more specific organizational responses drawing on examples highlighted in Chapter 4 of this report.

### General

- **Build staff capacity.** The electoral support community should consider following institutional staffing practices that they already utilize in areas such as gender, disabilities, 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 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 have 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 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 into the assessment process to ensure the inclusion of a diverse spectrum of viewpoints.
- **Disseminate assessment results.** Religious leaders and networks also consume 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 plans matched to organization priorities.** Various 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 CSOs as central partners in building a stable democracy. 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.** 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.

## Annex: Acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EMB	Election Management Body
EOM	Election Observation Mission
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NAMFREL	National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PPCRV	Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting

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