

## 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.

---

<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.

---

<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>

---

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

<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2021/0326/Myanmar-protesters-bridge-religious-divides-to-counter-military-coup>

<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-

---

<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>

---

<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.