

# Local Perspectives on Religious Freedom in INDONESIA



**This brief provides program designers, implementers and evaluators in the Religious and Ethnic Freedom space with practical insights and examples of locally developed indicators, aligned with the Grounded Accountability Model (GAM). It outlines the various ways representatives of local organizations and religious minorities perceive religious and ethnic freedom. The subsequent sections provide an action-oriented discussion of the indicators which emerged.**

## Introduction

The USAID approach to promoting sustainable development prioritizes local ownership, participation, and capacity strengthening. By applying this approach to the Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom (REF) program, the significance of engaging and collaborating with local stakeholders, including religious leaders and communities, in the development of indicators for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) projects is emphasized. The process of localizing indicators aims to honor and recognize local cultural specificities, preferences, and practices; and understand the local context and the complexities of religious practices, beliefs, and dynamics in the region. It also can strengthen the capacity of local actors and institutions to take the lead in promoting FORB, ensure the relevance and effectiveness of projects, and promote sustainability.

In order to determine how local actors and final beneficiaries define “religious freedom”, Search facilitated a process that engages community members to generate local indicators based on their everyday experiences of the concept, aligned with the Grounded Accountability Model (GAM). GAM is a participatory research approach

designed to inform interventions and drive greater accountability to the communities served by those interventions, and can be incorporated into monitoring and evaluation, project activities, and overall design. Search collected the data by conducting a workshop with civil society members, experts, and researchers who are working in the field of promoting FORB and holding a focus group discussion with representatives of religious minorities groups in Indonesia. The process generated a list of co-created and localized indicators, and participants voted for the top indicators that resonated most with them.

**Limitations:** It should be recognized that the data presented below represent the experiences of a limited number of people. Although they are representatives of religious minorities and local actors working in the field of religious freedom, they may not provide a detailed picture of every community in the country. Therefore, each intervention should ideally be preceded by a similar exercise with its beneficiaries. It is important to recognize that when dealing with religious groups, there may be risks of relativism. To avoid this, our team used several approaches. First, we were guided by a human rights and do no harm approach to ensure the results are aligned with these principles. The second was to create a comfortable space for participants. To do so, we invited the religious minority separately and listened to the majority opinion separately, and recognized that there may be representatives of minorities in the majority. Third, during the discussion we did not touch upon doctrinal theological issues, only experience related to ‘secular’ life. Fourth, we cross-checked with other existing sources of data to enhance the validity and credibility of findings and mitigate the presence of any biases. In this case, triangulation of literature review, FGD with religious minorities and the workshop with CSOs working the field were used.

## Country Background<sup>1</sup>

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. Muslims comprise 87.2 percent of the country's 267 million citizens, with around 99 percent identifying as Sunni and less than one percent and 0.2 percent identifying as Shi'a or Ahmadiyya Muslim, respectively. Protestant Christians comprise seven percent of the population, Roman Catholics 2.9 percent, and Hindus 1.7 percent; 0.9 percent identify with other minority religions such as Buddhism or Confucianism.

In light of this diversity, Indonesia has a long tradition of religious pluralism. Article 29 of its constitution "guarantees the independence of each resident to embrace religion and worship according to their respective religions and beliefs." The government has long promoted Pancasila, an ideology that comprises five principles: monotheism, civilized humanity, national unity, deliberative democracy, and social justice. In 2017, the Constitutional Court officially ruled for the recognition of native faiths. Citizens should be able to identify as *penghayat kepercayaan* (native-faith follower) in their identification cards. However, Population and Civil Registry Offices (who are responsible for issuing the ID cards) have different practices in each area, and some make the process very difficult. As a result, although the ruling exists, many citizens still experience discriminatory practices in these offices. In addition, the government requires all citizens to list their religious affiliation on their identification cards – a practice that has forced nonreligious persons and members of unrecognized religious minorities to misrepresent their faith or leave the field blank. This omission can impact access to licenses, permits, education, and employment.

Locally developed indicators that emerged as a result of GAM focus groups speak to these realities, while also highlighting the challenges that are unique to religious minorities.

## Local Understanding of Religious Freedom

Questions for the GAM discussions were constructed in such a way as to understand the various manifestations and understandings of freedom of religion and beliefs, i.e. when a person is alone by him/herself, reads the news or seeks information from the media, interacts with state bodies, relatives, neighbors or the community, desires access to education or work, encounters injustice, and finally, goes to military service or sends a close relative.

### *Freedom of Religion Challenges*

Participants in the discussion highlighted various challenges and issues related to FORB in everyday practice in Indonesia. They noted how a dominant narrative can breed suspicion and assumptions within the same religion, leading to opposition against traditions like Nagrang that contain Islamic values. Instances were mentioned where freedom is violated when certain groups impose standards on others, such as the prohibition of opening taverns during Ramadan, often resulting in violence. The problem of majority versus minority was highlighted, such as a perception of Sunni Muslims exerting their values and ideology on society to measure morality.

Discrimination and intolerance against religious groups like Ahmadis and Jews were emphasized, along with obstacles such as restrictions on constructing houses of worship, limitations on public expression, and the impact on daily activities like education, work, and pilgrimage. The complexity of religious conversions, interfaith marriages, and funeral arrangements under different affiliations was

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). (2023). 2023 Annual Report. [https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023%20Annual%20Report\\\\_1.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023%20Annual%20Report\\_1.pdf)

discussed, along with concerns about accessibility for people with special needs in places of worship and the treatment of children in religious settings. Participants also raised issues of corrupt practices and financial considerations in obtaining permits for establishing religious sites, advocating for a simpler process and addressing underlying problems rather than perpetuating them through financial contributions.

### *FORB in Everyday Practice*

Local actors emphasized that FORB involves the absence of pressure or intervention, allowing individuals to worship freely without disturbances. This encompassed the ability to construct places of worship without hindrance, even in the case of specific religious groups like Ahmadiyya. FORB was described as enabling access to religious spaces for minority groups and the LGBTQ+ community.

Participants stressed that FORB extends beyond religious spaces, encompassing individual faith expression in private domains. The erasure of religious labels on identification cards was discussed as a way to safeguard personal faith, viewing religion as a private matter that doesn't require public disclosure. This topic led to conversations on fairness and the avoidance of identity-based restrictions. The discussions highlighted how FORB enables individuals to embrace their beliefs without facing discrimination or limitations. The conversations also touched on the complexities of recognizing and respecting different traditions, rituals, and practices, promoting inclusivity even for those who worship at home.

### *FORB and Community*

According to participants, the prevalent collective culture in the country, which accentuates distinctions between in-groups and out-groups, was observed as sometimes contributing to fundamentalism. The exploration of diverse perspectives and the pursuit of common understanding were proposed as approaches to counter such tendencies. The influence of religious affiliation on societal perceptions, particularly in the context of interfaith marriages, emerged as a significant point of discussion. Furthermore, participants underscored the significance of providing unhindered access to religious spaces for marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community, individuals with disabilities and emphasized the importance of fostering an environment of acceptance and non-judgment within religious congregations and leadership circles. The role of interfaith initiatives in cultivating empathy, harmony, and mutual respect emerged as a recurring theme.

Additionally, participants explored the notion that true religious freedom extends beyond just places of worship. The conversation delved into personal experiences of religious songs at home being met with resistance, shedding light on the need for a broader cultural shift towards respecting individual spiritual expressions. The discussions echoed the sentiment that creating inclusive spaces for dialogue, understanding, and collaboration among diverse faiths can pave the way for a more harmonious society that embraces the principles of religious freedom.



## **FORB and Media**

The viewpoints shared by religious minorities highlighted the significant role that the media plays in shaping people's perceptions and influencing religion. The media was noted to often reflect and even amplify intolerance, especially when discussing matters related to FORB, using biased language and tones, particularly when discussing marginalized groups. Both traditional and online media, however, were seen to lack diversity in their perspectives. The Press Council's authority was seen as limited in controlling reports that were discriminatory in nature. Moreover, the intertwining of media ownership with political power was observed to hinder the media's ability to effectively act as a watchdog. The lack of a dedicated religion desk in newsrooms suggests that religion often gains attention only during cases or controversies, with coverage often lacking critical analysis and depth due to heavy workloads. It was also noted that the media sometimes fails to handle subjects like sexual violence and FORB violations with the necessary sensitivity, causing harm to the victims in the process. On the other hand, Media outlets also encounter a range of threats such as harassment, online intimidation, physical assaults on journalists, doxxing, and hacking of personal accounts, leading to censorship and limitations on reporting.

Participants explored the potential of media to be a force for positive change by promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding. They highlighted the importance of responsible reporting that accurately reflects religious diversity and fosters a culture of empathy. The media could increase their role in promoting interfaith dialogue, fostering understanding, and challenging prevailing stereotypes. The conversation also examined the role of media in raising awareness about lesser-known religions and minority religious groups. The need for media to go beyond mainstream narratives and provide a platform for voices that are often marginalized was emphasized. Overall, the discourse underscored the power of media in shaping public perceptions of religious freedom and promoting understanding among diverse faith communities.

## **FORB and State**

Participants shared diverse perspectives on the relationship between FORB and the state. The government's incorporation of measured indicators into the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan to promote tolerance was mentioned, but these indicators, which include quantifiable factors like mosque construction and pilgrimage numbers, might not fully capture the essence of true tolerance. Another participant highlighted how the government's religious management approach prioritizes social harmony over ensuring religious rights, illustrated by an incident where a Christian worship event was prohibited, revealing a confidence that the state will accommodate majority actions even when wrongful. Moreover, minority religions are not explicitly recognized in the constitution, and expressing atheism or criticizing religion can lead to criminalization and suppression.

Despite constitutional safeguards, individual freedoms to express beliefs face challenges due to power dynamics and political influences. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) defines religion based on specific criteria set by those in authority, restricting the recognition of diverse belief systems. Furthermore, individuals are not granted the freedom to choose their own authorities, including civil servants who are required to comply with the MUI (Indonesian Ulema Council). Participants also raised concerns about the government's role in controlling religious identity through the National ID Card's religion column. Removing this identification was mentioned as a first step towards ensuring personal privacy and avoiding discrimination. The need for state

representatives to personally engage grassroots initiatives and actively participate in interfaith dialogues was emphasized as a means to foster understanding and advocate for greater recognition of diverse beliefs.



### **FORB and Gender**

In the discussion concerning gender and FORB, participants delved into the intricate relationship between religious beliefs, cultural norms, and gender inequality. One participant noted how certain interpretations of religious ideologies, particularly within Islam, have contributed to the discrimination and subordination of women. This perspective highlighted that historical gender norms and external cultural influences have combined to diminish women's roles and agency within society. An example was provided of how the concept of serving husbands as a form of worship can lead to women enduring domestic violence under the misguided belief of religious duty.

Furthermore, the conversation emphasized the pervasive impact of these beliefs on women's lives. The systematic repetition of dogmas was noted as contributing to a culture of patriarchal subjugation, exemplified by the belief that a woman's value is tied to her role as a wife. Historical narratives were revisited to shed light on the erasure of powerful women figures during periods of colonization, illustrating the influence of external cultural norms on local gender dynamics. These narratives collectively illustrated the nuanced intersection between religious teachings, cultural practices, and gender inequality. The discussion emphasized the importance of challenging and reshaping these deeply ingrained beliefs and narratives to promote gender equality and empower women within the context of religious freedom.

Participants expressed that instances of discrimination, including curfews and clothing mandates, have been linked to politics, often becoming bargaining chips among political parties. The Indonesian Women's Ulema Congress (KUPI) occupies a significant role in advocating gender-sensitive interpretations of fiqh and promoting women's rights within the context of FORB. However, challenges arise due to power dynamics, limiting the strategic participation of female clerics. Despite their contributions, these clerics often struggle to establish a distinct identity within the movement due to structural constraints.

Overall, the representatives of the civil society and religious minority groups co-created 130 everyday indicators of religious freedom. These are the **top positive and negative localized indicators**, co-generated, voted, and selected from this discussion:

**Civil society representatives** shared that they would take the following 10 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom in their communities:

- When people can celebrate their religious festivals/activities without any fear and restrictions.
- When people from different communities believe that there is a safe space to have equal recognition.
- When minority communities believe that they can practice their cultural belief system without any fear or threat.
- When I have the liberty to make choices in my life without being scrutinized by family and society.
- When people in my community are heard and included in the decision-making process, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, gender, and age.
- When people in my community are able to speak up about their voices and concerns without any fear or restriction by others.
- When community people believe that the local government is always proactive in identifying and addressing their needs, regardless of their identity.
- When local religious actors have a clear understanding of FORB related concepts (like tolerance, coexistence, etc.) to preach to others.
- When people feel protected from religious/ethnicity-based prosecution.
- When people from all religions, regardless of how big or small, believe that they are formally recognized by the State.

**Religious minorities** shared that they would take the following 10 signals/indicators as signs of religious freedom:

- When ID cards are designed without any indication of religious affiliation, fostering a sense of unity and belonging to the nation while avoiding the creation of divisions based on religion or concerns about one's personal religious beliefs.
- When people/students are not discriminated against or bullied based on their identity (race and religion) in school and public places.
- When gender minorities are 'positively seen' by religious organizations/leaders and may visit places of worship safely.
- When the politicians do not play the majority-minority card to manipulate and divide people.
- When people are not prohibited to go to their places of worship by others.
- When there is a general perception that people help each other in difficult times regardless of their ethnic or religious identities.
- When social media and mainstream media are powerful in raising awareness about religious issues.
- When people feel that there are enough inclusive and safe interfaith platforms that allow them to interact freely with representatives from different religious, ethnic, and gender affiliations.

When people believe that one can convert his/her religion, marry someone from another religion, or die without being worried about his/her body (funeral arrangements).

When everyone is free to express or worship their belief without fear and restrictions regardless of their ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

Taken together, these indicators reflect the local Indonesian perspectives on the meaning of religious freedom. Locally developed indicators are a great source for guiding actions and promoting accountability to local communities. Stakeholders such as civil society organizations, program developers, policymakers, government agencies and local communities themselves can all act on localized indicators. While these indicators may appear broad, they not only measure specific outcomes but also capture shifts in people's attitudes and practices within communities. For instance, when religious minority groups can participate in and observe their religious festivals without fear or restrictions, it signifies a degree of acceptance and acknowledgment of their beliefs. This indicates that the local community and authorities respect their religious choices and ensure equal treatment regarding their religious practices.

These indicators not only reveal the existing challenges related to religious freedom from the vantage point of religious minorities and local participants, but they also offer insight into potential programmatic interventions in the Indonesian context. For instance, the indicators also demonstrate how state structures and politicians sow divides between majority and minority religions and that gender minorities face barriers to inclusion. These mean that there could be a variety of program interventions, including:

- Address reluctance to acknowledge certain religions and challenges of macro-level change, emphasizing top-down reforms alongside community-level initiatives.
- Promote grassroots engagement, interfaith dialogues led by religious leaders and the broader community, and the inclusion of people with disabilities in designing places of worship.
- Propose a peace curriculum extending beyond local mediation forums for peaceful coexistence and support against persecution.
- Urge NGOs to develop gender-sensitive Standard Operating Procedures and enhance sensitivity in addressing women-related FORB issues.
- Advocate for journalist education and support to counter biased viewpoints influencing journalistic content.
- Recognize the importance of covering FORB issues in newsrooms, aligning press freedom with freedom of religion and belief to foster open dialogue and understanding.

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