

Faith in Policy: right-sizing religious actors' role in democratic processes



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At a Glance: People all over the world look to religion and belief systems for guidance on how to live their lives, including in the public sphere. Unsurprisingly, religious actors therefore play a significant role in shaping the social and political landscapes of many societies - despite their engagement remaining a contentious issue between detractors and supporters of their involvement. This brief highlights the reality of their public participation and, relying on lessons learned and best practices from a number of case studies, draws out guiding principles to frame recommendations for donors, policymakers, religious actors, and other practitioners seeking effective religious engagement in democratic processes.

Who is a “religious actor”?

Search for Common Ground intentionally uses the more inclusive term “religious actors” rather than “religious leaders”.

Religious actors include people who may not have formal religious authority, titles or qualifications - but who still hold influence and respect in their communities for their religious knowledge and/or values. These may be men, women and youth, community [lay-leaders](#), educators, social workers, faith-based organizations, activists, etc.

WHY ENGAGE RELIGIOUS ACTORS?

[84%](#) of the world population - or 8 in 10 people - identify with a religious community. Religions and beliefs provide people with guidance on how to live their lives, what they identify as good or desirable, and what values they hold dearest. As a result, it is unsurprising that religious beliefs inform [how people engage in politics](#), from their choice of candidate during elections to the policies they support or reject.

Grounded in their social and moral authority, religious actors thus play a significant role in shaping the social and political landscapes of many societies. In some parts of the world, religious institutions may be viewed with [distrust](#); however in others, religious leaders are seen as more [trustworthy](#) than politicians and other authorities.

In times of polarization and conflict in particular, this duality comes to the fore. People’s deeply held religious identities mean that religion can easily be manipulated to advance a binary ‘us versus them’ narrative, becoming a lightning rod for conflict and a threat to safe, inclusive and just societies where all are able to participate regardless of religion or belief.

Religious actors’ involvement in democratic processes therefore remains contentious - detractors focus near exclusively on real or potential damages, and advocates on proven or theorized benefits. With over two decades’ experience [engaging religious actors in a wide range of sociopolitical contexts](#), Search for Common Ground (Search) recognises both the risks and opportunities of religious engagement. This brief takes a nuanced approach to the role of religious actors in civic space, before highlighting some of the ways in which their positive impact has been promoted and more negative influences mitigated. From there, it draws out recommendations for a range of stakeholders on how to engage religious actors constructively in democratic processes.

RELIGIOUS ACTORS ARE ACTIVE PLAYERS IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

Whether it is the Islamic practice of *shura* (“consultation”), the decision-making processes inside Buddhist *sangha* (“assembly”) or the Jewish concept of *tzedeq umishpat* (“justice and righteousness”), religions and beliefs worldwide have many elements that find parallels with democratic traditions and public participation. At the same time, religion has throughout the centuries been used to justify a wide range of political systems from the divine right of kings to participatory governance. Rather than sift through evolving interpretations and traditions to decide one way or another, this section concerns itself with the concrete actions that religious actors take to influence democratic processes in their societies - positively or negatively:

1. **Religious actors are an [essential part of civil society](#) alongside non-governmental organizations, trade unions, academia, etc.** They run food banks, advocate for [sustainable development](#), pledge their support for [health and vaccinations](#), and myriad other initiatives that contribute to the fabric of society. Like other members of civil society, religious actors may choose to [express their views](#) on matters affecting their communities and congregations, and engage the authorities to raise awareness or seek action on issues of concern. Democracy involves both the rule of the majority and the protection of minorities. Whether a country is majority atheist and minority religious - or vice versa - religious actors are crucial civil society actors whose perspectives deserve inclusion alongside those of women, youth, people with disabilities, business owners, and other interest groups - categories that may well overlap with “religious actor” as well as each other - in order to ensure its proper functioning.
2. **Religious actors’ popular legitimacy makes them well placed to act in places where other civil society actors may not.** This has been the case in countries like [Burundi](#) or the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), where religious actors continue to serve as voices of political opposition in a restricted civic space. Their moral and social authority makes governments less willing to move against them to prevent greater backlash from their communities. In other contexts, however, religious actors may be singled out by the authorities as targets for [repression campaigns](#) precisely because of their religious beliefs and credibility. Similarly, when military actors took control of the governments in [Burkina Faso](#) and [Niger](#), part of the initial response was to send multifaith delegations of traditional and religious leaders to negotiate with the new authorities in an effort to prevent violence and encourage a return to democracy and rule of law. Although this delegation was ultimately unsuccessful, their religious authority gave them credibility where others may have been accused of foreign interference or promoting a “Western agenda”.
3. **Religious actors can leverage their influence in order to quell violence ahead of or in the aftermath of tense [electoral processes](#).** Following the 2022 presidential elections in [Kenya](#), religious leaders were called upon to mediate between the incumbent president and the newly elected candidate to ensure a smooth and peaceful transition of power. In addition to the politicians themselves, the interreligious coalition also engaged with the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) responsible for certifying the electoral results. Despite initial rejection of the results by some of the parties involved, the election was eventually accepted and a repeat of the violent 2015 elections that many feared did not materialize. In this instance, religious actors’ intervention was particularly effective since they had already played a role in the run-up to and during the election, from promoting [ethics and integrity](#) in politics to [training women election monitors and observers. combating hate speech. encouraging youth engagement and more.](#) Involvement may also be more indirect: in Guatemala, the [Platform for Indigenous Women](#) (PMI) included psychosocial support and ceremonies held by Mayan spiritual leaders as a core component underpinning their work advocating for electoral reform.
4. **However, the power of religion in citizens’ lives means religious actors are not immune to instrumentalizing religion in order to gain or maintain power.** A global trend over the last few years has been rising [religious nationalism](#) in a range of countries with [India](#), the [United States](#), [Turkey](#) and [Israel](#) as some of the more prominent - but by no means the only - cases. Religious actors may also choose to prop up and legitimise authoritarian regimes where they and their institutions benefit from proximity to power, as seen in [Argentina](#), [Myanmar](#), [Russia](#) or [Spain](#) over the last century. At other times they may become co-opted through corruption: for example, a partner of the [Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action](#) (JISRA) reported that politicians would bribe traditional and religious leaders in their locality. In exchange these leaders would preach and otherwise leverage their religious authority to influence the youth vote during elections.

5. **At times, the line between political and religious actors can blur or disappear completely.** Many [national assemblies](#) have reserved seats for elected representatives of various religious communities, usually minorities - although the elected representative will rarely be a religious leader, they will represent a religious group, effectively making them religious lay leaders. Other times, such as in [Iraq](#) and [Mali](#), religious leaders may also lead political parties; in these cases, their involvement in the public affairs of their country is argued as the natural consequence of their religious values, which also runs the risk of any criticism of their positions being pushed back on as assaulting their beliefs or moral legitimacy. Then there are those actors who are harder to categorize as one, both or neither: for example, political figures whose discourse and campaigns centers around Christian-Nationalism in [Zambia](#) or the [United States](#), or [Hindutva](#) and other political ideologies that explicitly favor one religious group to the detriment of other communities.
6. **Political actors are also capable of instrumentalizing religion or belief to achieve their policy goals.** State actors, for example, may use religious argumentation to justify passing or repealing policies - even if these do not align with the wishes of the belief communities they claim to represent. Without adequate monitoring mechanisms in place, societies where a religion's hierarchy is affiliated with the State are at [higher risk](#) of institutional and political corruption, lack of transparency, and instability. In Pakistan, political and religious leadership have become [deeply enmeshed](#), with politicians instrumentalizing religion to boost their legitimacy and de-credibilize opponents, leading to a polarized context where debates on issues such as the country's blasphemy laws can lead to violence. At the same time, the close association of religious and political power has led to loss of credibility for the former, which may partly explain the main Islamic political parties' [defeat](#) in the 2024 elections. In some contexts religious institutions also act as soft power tools for political actors to undermine democratic institutions and processes abroad as well as at home, as in the case of the Russian Orthodox Church's efforts to increase Russia's influence in the [Central African Republic](#) and [Czechia](#).

KEYS TO RIGHT-SIZING RELIGIOUS ACTORS' ROLE IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

Religious actors' role in elections or the daily governance of a country cannot be easily categorized as a net positive or negative. It is, instead, a reality that stakeholders must contend with rather than wish away or ignore. Fortunately, over the years a number of initiatives have provided some best practices and lessons learned on how to engage religious actors in democratic processes:

1. **Religious leaders can be equipped to become mediators in times of political tension and fight religious instrumentalisation by politicians.** In Kenya, the JISRA project trained religious leaders in [preventing places of worship from being used for political campaigning](#), in addition to the mediation efforts after the electoral results mentioned previously. In Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission [highlighted its repeated engagement with religious leaders](#) in the run up to the 2023 elections on issues ranging from sharing updates on voting tools to combating religiously motivated hate speech. Although elections and related fears of violence motivated the outreach, they also serve the longer term goal of ensuring that even outside of electoral periods, they are well equipped to continuously maintain a peaceful environment both in their communities and online. Following the attempted assassination of US presidential candidate Donald Trump, Search - as lead of the civil society coalition to prevent electoral violence in Pennsylvania - sent guidance and [resources](#) to local clergy, in advance of their Sunday sermons, on how to avoid further polarization following the incident. Consistent engagement and relationships built with religious actors over time increased mutual trust and meant that, when the time came to act, joint action was smoother and more impactful.
2. **Democratic dialogue and joint action between diverse actors in interreligious structures provide a microcosm of decision-making in a pluralistic society.** Interfaith structures such as joint council or dialogue platforms mirror sociopolitical diversity and operate on consensus-seeking processes similar to democracies, creating spaces where participants are able to recognise diversity and difference as a resource rather than a threat. In Search's highly contextualized [religious freedom roundtables](#), religious actors in Sri Lanka, Lebanon and Uzbekistan came together to collaborate on issues of freedom of religion or belief. In Lebanon, participants built coalitions to advocate against sectarianism; meanwhile in Uzbekistan, the roundtable became one of the only avenues for religious leaders to engage the authorities in a restricted civic space; and in Sri Lanka, participants developed and advocated for inclusive religious

education materials to combat prejudice. In all three countries, the democratic exchange and decision-making inside the roundtables led to greater [interreligious action](#) to support pluralism and religious freedom.

3. **Religious actors promote democratic values and processes in a wide range of ways, requiring creativity and flexibility in religious engagement.** In some contexts, this has translated into organizing community resources to [bus citizens](#) - especially those with limited funds - to polling stations to increase voter turnout in elections and practically make voting accessible for all. In others they have worked to increase their congregations' knowledge of electoral processes, helping build trust in democratic exercises and build resilience to mis- and disinformation around elections. As previously highlighted, Religious actors can also be trusted election observers, as in the case of the [Philippines](#) where the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) and Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting have been involved in election monitoring since the 1980s. Religious actors by and large seek to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem - however, what role they play in this solution will depend largely on their context's history, culture, challenges and their own relation to it. For example religious actors in a devout society may engage with democratic processes more visibly than those in more secular societies - but even in the latter they have a role to play in [promoting civic engagement](#). Religious actors are [everyday partners](#) in fostering healthy democracies and not simply in times of crisis.
4. **Religious actors can advocate for human rights guarantees that underpin democratic processes, including freedom of thought, conscience and belief.** Often referred to as freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) or religious freedom, this right is part of the broader human rights architecture that are indivisible and mutually supporting. FoRB requires (among other rights) freedom of assembly, of expression and of opinion to be fully realized - much like democracy. Religious actors can be powerful advocates of freedom of thought, conscience and belief for all when they are equipped to understand how it benefits and aligns with their convictions. In 2023, religious communities in Mali were divided on the role of "laïcité" (secularism) in the country's proposed new constitution. Ahead of the referendum, JISRA organized a number of activities including a youth-led [national interreligious forum](#) to discuss concerns and ways forward, leading to a much greater understanding of secularism in the country. When the new constitution was adopted with a qualifier highlighting how secularism guaranteed freedom to worship for all Malians, religious leaders and communities were largely satisfied by both the outcome and the opportunity to have contributed to civic dialogue on the issue.
5. **Religious actors are a diverse category and need to be engaged accordingly to increase reach across the political and social spectrum.** There is a tendency among certain stakeholders to think of all religious engagement as focusing on older, male, formal religious leaders with conservative views. These, however, are only a part of the mosaic - religious actors can also be [women](#), [LGBTQIA+](#), [youth](#), or advocates for the [inclusion](#) of traditionally marginalized groups. For example in Indonesia, JISRA partner [AMAN](#) launched [KUPI](#), an initiative aimed at: "*redefining the term 'Ulama' to include women and promote gender equality from an Islamic perspective*". Bringing together men and women from different fields, including religious actors, and using human rights legal frameworks as part of its deliberations, KUPI Islamic scholars have [issued fatwas](#) to successfully influence policy on a diverse range of issues of religious interest - from child marriage to waste management, as well as engaging religiously conservative members of the Indonesia Parliament through intrafaith work. In Nigeria, [Tearfund](#) equipped traditional leaders to involve women and youth in their local decision-making processes, resulting in the inclusion of a woman in the traditional council, a previously male-only structure. In Germany, religious actors have been actively countering [the rise of right-wing populism and radicalizing narratives](#), which threaten the social cohesion necessary for democratic participation. Recognising the political diversity in religious communities and between religious actors - as with any civil society group - is crucial for effective engagement.
6. **Religious and political actors can engage and collaborate on policy without seeking to instrumentalise one another.** In Kenya, following the [Shakahola Forest deaths](#) - where over 400 people died and hundreds more nearly starved after following the instructions of a new religious movement's leader - the government formed a Presidential taskforce including religious leaders and legal experts to provide [recommendations](#) on how to prevent future incidents. With religious institutions pushing back on some of the recommendations due to concerns about freedom of religion and expression, and several ongoing court cases, Search and other organizations have worked with both the authorities and religious actors to maintain space for dialogue and consultation to move towards win-win solutions. Meanwhile the Inter-Parliamentary Union - bringing together over 180 of the world's parliaments - published a 2023 [report](#) on the institutional engagement of

parliaments with different religions and beliefs in their day-to-day work, and thus necessarily with religious actors. It details a number of ways in which this engagement takes place, from dedicated or broader civil society consultations to specialized parliamentary committees or unofficial interest groups, and more informal opportunities such as religious celebrations, ad hoc events, etc. Official channels for dialogue with religious actors as part of a broader civil society engagement, supported by appropriate checks and balances, help mitigate the risk of instrumentalisation by one party or another in healthy democratic societies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, religious actors are influential figures who can become strong partners in promoting healthy democratic processes and civic space through their engagement with communities and political actors. Drawing on the examples above, the following recommendations are for donors, policymakers, religious actors and other practitioners active in democratic governance on how to further more effective involvement of religious actors in democratic processes while minimizing the risks of instrumentalisation and polarization:

1. Recognise and systematically include religious actors as core civil society actors whose perspectives are essential to healthy democratic functioning.

- a. Donors and policymakers should adopt inclusive definitions of religious actors that create space for religious women, youth, traditional and indigenous religions, and other traditionally excluded groups from participating in religious engagement efforts.
- b. Political and state actors should strengthen their capacity to effectively engage with religious actors by building their religious literacy with trainings and regular dialogue.
- c. Political and state actors should engage religious actors throughout [electoral cycles](#) but also as part of regular consultations with broader civil society on all policies.

2. Invest in (intra- and inter-)faith and multisectoral initiatives to support peace and democracy.

- a. Donors should fund intra-, inter-religious and multisectoral initiatives to promote and support democracy and democratic processes, particularly in fragile and conflict areas and contexts where religion has a strong influence on society.
- b. Non-faith-based civil society actors should collaborate with religious actors in multisectoral coalitions (i.e. that gather multiple sectors of society) to engage policymakers on democracy, human rights and other issues of mutual concern.
- c. Interreligious platforms should act as convening points for religious actors to collaborate in supporting open and tolerant civic spaces where all community members are able to participate in democratic processes.

3. Prevent and mitigate the instrumentalisation of religion by political actors and vice-versa.

- a. Political campaigning guidelines should caution candidates against campaigning in places of worship, using religiously motivated attacks (or inciting followers to do the same), and other actions likely to contribute to interreligious violence.
- b. Religious actors should refrain from endorsing specific political actors or campaigning on their behalf, but rather use their platforms to promote religious values of tolerance and peace, in order to avoid contributing to political violence and maintain their legitimacy as mediators.

- c. Donors should support initiatives that strengthen religious and political actors' capacity to engage with each other in safe, legal ways that support rather than undermine democratic functioning.

4. Work with religious actors to promote freedom of religion or belief and other human rights for all as part of healthy democracies.

- a. Donors and civil society actors should engage with religious actors in their efforts to promote peace, democracy and human rights such as FoRB, using contextualized, faith sensitive language and [approaches](#).
- b. Policymakers should enact and implement policies that guarantee FoRB for all as part of a broader human rights framework designed to sustain peace and democratic principles.
- c. Policymakers and civil society actors should engage a diversity of religious actors to inform policy on FoRB, paying particular attention to the perspectives of religious and belief minorities, women and youth.

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