



Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

Parliamentary report on religion and belief

Working towards more
peaceful and inclusive societies



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“If we manage to foster constructive interfaith, intercultural dialogue, we will be providing answers to many of the dilemmas and challenges threatening the future of coexistence and of our planet. All of us are in the same boat, facing a common destiny. As we rise to challenges, we must ponder on the world we will be bequeathing to the coming generations. This is as much the responsibility of parliaments, religious institutions and intellectual elites, as it is the duty of governments, civil society and the media.”

HM King Mohammed VI of Morocco, Commander of the Faithful
Inaugural ceremony, Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue:
Working together for our common future (Marrakesh, 2023)

Foreword by the Secretary General

In 2022, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) embarked on a five-year strategy encouraging parliaments to engage with broader ecosystems for the promotion of peace, democracy and sustainable development for all. As part of this, the IPU launched a new initiative to examine different links between political institutions and decision makers, on the one hand, and religions and beliefs, on the other, through a series of reports, conferences, webinars and dialogues.

Part 1 of the *Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief* was published in May 2023 in the lead-up to the first IPU Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, which took place in Marrakesh, Morocco, in June 2023. The first part of the report considers ways in which religion and belief are institutionally present in the life and work of national parliaments.

Part 2 of the report explores ways in which parliaments and especially parliamentarians interact with religion and belief to promote more peaceful, just and inclusive societies. It considers how religious engagement by policymakers can contribute to the upholding of the rule of law, human rights and democracy, in line with the IPU's policy goals.

This second part of the report was prepared against a backdrop of increasing polarization between States and communities, where religion and belief are being instrumentalized in global conflicts, and trust has been strained between and within religions themselves as well as among political decision makers.

The IPU is addressing these global tensions with renewed vigour, drawing on its 136-year track record of using dialogue and diplomacy as tools for peacebuilding and conflict resolution, providing a platform for people of good will to work together for the upholding of human rights and the rule of law, and the promotion of peace and understanding.

The present report comes on the eve of the Second Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, due to take place in Rome, Italy, in June 2025. Here the global parliamentary community will join religious leaders, faith-based organizations and experts from all over the world, to discuss ways to "strengthen trust and embrace hope, for the sake of our common future".

It is a great pleasure to present this publication, which reflects the IPU's commitment to dialogue and to an all-of-society, inclusive approach to its work. It is my hope that the coming years will see more robust joint action to advance our shared values and goals, as the best possible way of overcoming the current challenges.



Martin Chungong
Secretary General
Inter-Parliamentary Union



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The first Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue took place in Marrakesh, Morocco, on 13–15 June 2023. © IPU

Introduction

“Our work as parliamentarians can benefit from greater awareness of the influence and importance of religion and belief, and of their contribution to the welfare of humankind. We must engage these networks as allies in our common cause for social justice and coexistence.”

Marrakesh Communiqué, 2023

Overview

This *Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief* is part of the broader engagement of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) with religion and belief to promote inclusive and peaceful societies where the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all are guaranteed and protected.

The IPU is the global organization of national parliaments. It was founded in 1889 as the first multilateral political organization in the world. Its membership currently stands at 181 national parliaments. The IPU’s mission is to empower parliaments and parliamentarians to work for peace, democracy, human rights and sustainable development. It does this through providing a platform for political dialogue and parliamentary diplomacy and supporting its Members to deliver more effectively on policy, uphold the rule of law and serve the people.

The two parts of the *Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief*

The *Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief* is a unique publication seeking to shed light on the different ways in which parliaments and their members engage with religion and belief. The report is divided into two parts. Part 1, published in 2023, showcases examples of how religion and belief are institutionally present in the life and work of parliaments, such as through:

- Highlighting the relationship of religion or belief to the identity of the State, as outlined in a constitutional text, which can be reflected in areas such as legislation, budgetary allocation, selection criteria for certain offices or the allocation of reserved seats.
- Parliamentary committees, which consider issues relating to religion and belief, including amending or drafting legislation, budgetary allocation and oversight of government.
- Consultation mechanisms to advise parliaments on the conduct of their work and ensure they remain inclusive and connected places.

- Parliamentary traditions reflecting the religious or belief identity, values or heritage of broader society, such as through prayers, faith-based oaths of office, and dress codes.
- Cross-party common interest groups which allow parliamentarians to engage with political issues that intersect with religious issues.
- Parliamentary participation in or acknowledgement of faith-related events, such as religious celebrations, prayer breakfasts, fellowship networks, days/weeks/months dedicated to different languages, cultures and faiths, and commemorations in relation to hate crime anniversaries.
- Dialogue with representatives of religions or beliefs around common issues or between parliamentary and non-parliamentary actors around issues with a religious or belief dimension.¹

Part 2 considers select policy areas that have a religious or belief dimension and examines the links with parliaments and their role. It focuses on good practices and learnings shared by former or current members of parliament (MPs) from around the world, as well as by representatives of religions or beliefs and other experts and networks.

Objectives

The present report as a whole – Parts 1 and 2 – pursues a number of aims.

It is intended firstly as a tool to facilitate mutual learning. It provides insights into how parliaments as institutions and parliamentarians as representatives protect and represent religions and beliefs within society through legislation and activities. It also outlines different types of parliamentary engagement with religions and beliefs to promote inclusion, peaceful coexistence and dialogue. The report endeavours to highlight the diversity of parliamentary cultures worldwide and to create awareness of the different expressions of religion and belief in many societies and parliaments.

The report also encourages parliaments to take inspiration from good practices developed in other countries and to implement measures conducive to inclusive and more peaceful societies. It invites parliaments to scrutinize their legislation with a view to aligning it with international commitments and human rights frameworks, and invites MPs to consider the diverse needs and interests of all segments of society, including religious and belief communities, in the exercise of their lawmaking, budgeting, oversight and representative functions.

Lastly, the report is an invitation to inter-parliamentary and interfaith dialogue, particularly around sharing practice and experience to better guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to promote the rule of law.

Sources

The report draws on a number of sources:

- A survey shared with IPU Member Parliaments and Permanent Observer organizations in March 2022. Part 1 of the report gives particular attention to the survey results.
- Key informant interviews conducted with 62 parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, religious leaders and other experts between 2022 and 2024.
- Contributions made during the Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue (Marrakesh, June 2023).
- Events of national parliaments or inter-parliamentary gatherings dedicated to interfaith or intercultural dialogue, as well as the webinar series against hatred based on religion and belief, developed by the IPU and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in cooperation with the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB).²
- The IPU's own publications, resolutions and declarations, and its open-data platform, Parline, in addition to its overall public engagement.
- United Nations (UN) resolutions, covenants, reports and declarations, and other open-access literature.

In order to remain consistent in its use of sources, the report uses English-language translations of national constitutions and basic laws as found on the [Constitute](#) website, a platform developed by the Comparative Constitutions Project at the University of Texas in Austin and the University of Chicago, which contains in-force constitutions and basic laws from 193 States. The report uses religious demography data found in the annual International Religious Freedom Reports of the US Department of State (US DoS). The present report makes use of the 2023 US DoS reports, which were released in June 2024. The US DoS reports draw on national census data in their demographic estimates where available.

Limitations of this report

The present report reflects an emerging area of research. Its results aim to be indicative and not comprehensive. The data is limited by the good practice examples that were shared with the IPU. Although efforts were made to provide a diversity of experiences, less data was available from countries which do not have an Abrahamic religion as the majority religion.

¹ Part 1 of the report is available in French and English on the [IPU website](#) or in hard copy from the IPU Secretariat (please contact postbox@ipu.org).

² Also see p. 36, box on "Webinar series against hatred based on religion and belief (2024/2025)".

Executive summary

The *Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief* examines how parliaments and parliamentarians engage with religion and belief in their work to build more peaceful and inclusive societies. It recognizes that religion and belief constitute an important dimension of the identity, values and decision-making processes of individuals and communities. Religion and belief can influence how people participate in society, how they exercise their civic and political rights, and how they view their allegiance to the State.

The information and findings in this report aim to contribute to the broader learning of the global parliamentary community about the diversity of parliamentary cultures and the unique context of each society, determined by its own blend of religions, beliefs and traditions. It also seeks to identify how engagement with religion and belief can support the work of parliamentarians in their efforts to uphold the rule of law, human rights and justice in their societies and can promote peaceful coexistence.

A long-standing engagement

The IPU has a long history of engagement with religion and belief via declarations, resolutions and activities. These reflect the commitment of IPU Members to work towards creating more peaceful, just and inclusive societies, in line with international human rights standards. They also underscore the duty of parliaments to be inclusive spaces, reflective of broader society, including its diversity of religion and belief, and to ensure that this aspect is integrated into parliamentary activities and mechanisms.

The IPU has increased its engagement in interfaith dialogue in recent years, in response to growing polarization between and within societies. The first Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue: *Working together for our common future* took place in Marrakesh in 2023, bringing together parliamentarians in conjunction with representatives of religions and beliefs, international, faith-based and civil society organizations, and academia. The conference declaration, the Marrakesh Communiqué, provided a road map for the IPU's future engagement with religion or belief, and announced the Second Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, due to take place in Rome in June 2025 during the Jubilee Year of the Catholic Church announced by the late Pope Francis.

Upholding freedom of religion or belief

The right to freely choose, change and manifest a religion or belief is protected under international law and reflected in national laws. Nevertheless, this right is frequently not applied fully or equally to all citizens and non-citizens.

Parliaments and parliamentarians can engage in the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief formally in standing parliamentary committees or informally in cross-party caucuses. Current and/or former parliamentarians can participate in dedicated networks focusing on human rights or freedom of religion or belief. One such network is the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB), which has regional networks in Southeast Asia, Africa, Southeast Europe, and Latin America. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief also supports these networks.

The promotion of freedom of religion or belief is paramount to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a key feature of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, since religious actors and faith-based organizations, which are important contributors towards sustainable development, will thrive in more just and inclusive societies. Several organizations involved in SDG work engage parliamentarians around issues of freedom of religion or belief.

Countering hate speech

Hatred based on religion or belief has been on the rise in recent years, as societies become increasingly polarized. In this climate, parliamentarians are especially called upon to be responsible leaders and lawmakers and to work towards creating more peaceful, just and inclusive societies grounded in respect for the rule of law, human rights and justice.

Parliamentarians must be able to delineate between speech acts that are lawfully protected within the right to freedom of expression, and those which cross the threshold to incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. They can be helped in this by soft law instruments, such as UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution 16/18, the Rabat Plan of Action, and the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, which offer guidance and good practices, in line with international human rights standards.

Other tools for countering identity-based hatred include parliamentary codes of conduct, MPs speaking out against hateful acts and standing up for marginalized groups, educational material and webinars on salient issues driving polarization – such as Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and conspiracy theories – providing human rights education around international standards, and engaging in dialogue around countering hatred and promoting more inclusive societies.

Advancing the rights and inclusion of religious and belief minorities

Religious and belief minorities frequently experience exclusion, and parliaments are among the most important national institutions for the upholding of their rights. MPs can do this by: supporting legislation designed to combat discrimination, protect freedom of religion or belief and uphold freedom of expression; ensuring that parliaments are inclusive spaces, reflecting the diversity of broader society; exercising oversight over government policy impacting religious or belief minorities; and speaking out against hatred directed towards religious or belief minorities.

The IPU membership passed resolutions in 1999 and 2007 on the upholding of the rights of religious and belief minorities. It also ran a dedicated project on the representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament and has organized events dedicated to anti-discrimination legislation and the protection of minority rights. The parliamentary conferences on interfaith dialogue actively engage religious and belief minorities in deliberations.

Parliamentarians advocate for the rights of religious and belief minorities in different ways, such as using their representative function to give visibility to the situation of different groups, electing leaders representative of the religious diversity of the State, inviting religious and belief minorities to parliament to give recognition to their contribution to society, and engaging in cross-party caucuses dedicated to different religious and belief minorities.

Advocating for women's rights

Parliamentarians have a key role to play in the promotion of gender equality and women's rights. The IPU has been working to increase the number of women in parliament and to transform parliaments into gender-sensitive institutions delivering on women's rights. The IPU has been among the first to take a stand against the violation of women's rights, also in the name of religion or belief, and recognizing the role and responsibility of parliamentarians in this regard.

Women of faith can be interlocutors for parliamentarians around shared concerns, such as countering gendered hate speech, and supporting women's engagement in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. Women are often negatively impacted by restrictions on the external manifestation of freedom of religion or belief, and parliamentarians can advocate for this as a women's rights issue.

Religious actors and parliamentarians play an important role in changing attitudes towards harmful practices through context-sensitive community engagement, education, advocacy and speaking out. Religion or belief is sometimes used to justify harmful practices, and working together with religious communities to address harmful practices and ensure respect for women's rights brings both challenges and opportunities.

Building bridges of trust

Parliaments, religions and beliefs share a common commitment to upholding the equal human dignity of all persons and creating cohesive societies where the needs and rights of all are met. There are numerous examples of collaborations between parliamentarians, religious or belief actors and civil society to achieve these goals. These include through: dialogue mechanisms; joint efforts for the promotion of human rights and the rule of law; approaching peacebuilding efforts through a human security and common security lens; exemplifying ethical and inclusive leadership; highlighting shared values that transcend the religious and political spheres; joint efforts to foster national unity and the coexistence of different groups; social engagement around social welfare and social justice issues; and engaging in parliamentary and religious diplomacy.

Going forward

The present report invites MPs to take note of the efforts of their peers around the world working to build more peaceful, just and inclusive societies through engagement with religious and belief actors. It also looks towards the Second Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, to be held in Rome in June 2025, where the global parliamentary community will gather with senior religious leaders and international experts to consider how to build bridges of trust, repair ruptures and work together to address growing polarization.

Parts 1 and 2 of the report are indicative studies and invite further input relating to parliamentary engagement with religion or belief to capture the breadth, depth and diversity of good practices worldwide. We invite you to contact us at: postbox@ipu.org.

Timeline of the IPU's engagement with religion and belief

1998 Attaining the World Food Summit's objectives through a sustainable development strategy. Inter-Parliamentary Conference, Rome (Italy). Organized by the IPU with the support of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, hosted by the Italian Parliament, included audience with Pope John Paul II.

2012 Citizenship, identity and linguistic and cultural diversity in a globalized world. Declaration. 127th IPU Assembly, Quebec City (Canada).

2016 Ensuring lasting protection against destruction and deterioration for the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of humanity. Resolution. 134th IPU Assembly, Lusaka (Zambia).

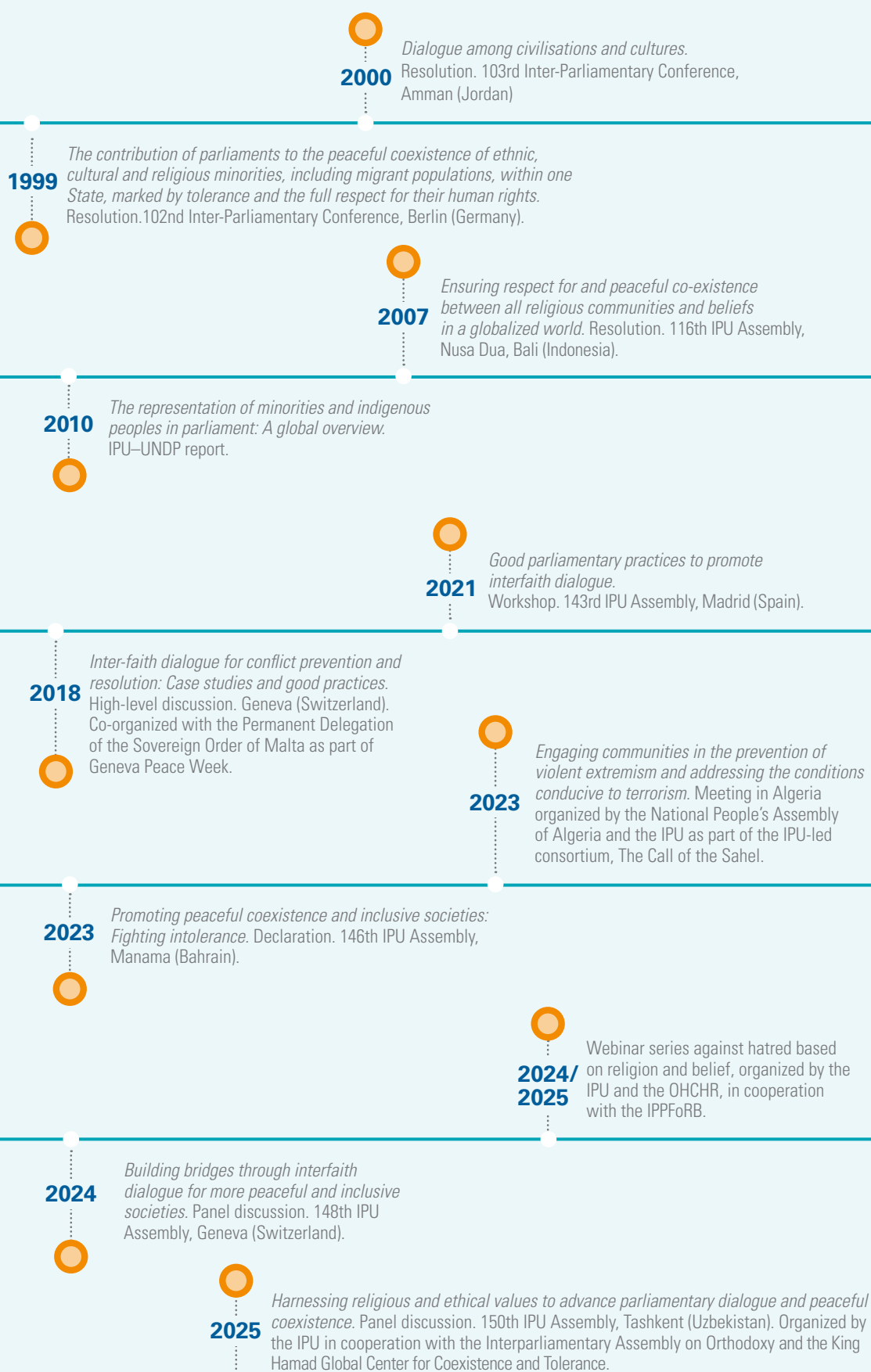
2017 Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue. Declaration. 137th IPU Assembly, St. Petersburg (Russian Federation).

2023 Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief: Working towards more peaceful and inclusive societies (Part 1).

2023 Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue: Working together for our common future. Marrakesh (Morocco). Organized by the IPU and the Parliament of Morocco, in cooperation with Religions for Peace and with the support of the UN Alliance of Civilizations and the Mohammadia League of Religious Scholars. Outcome document: Marrakesh Communiqué.

2025 Second Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue: Strengthening trust and embracing hope for our common future. Rome (Italy), 19–21 June 2025. Organized by the IPU and the Italian Parliament with the support of Religions for Peace (upcoming).

2025 Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief: Working towards more peaceful and inclusive societies (Part 2)



Overview of IPU engagement with religion and belief

The IPU has a long history of declarations and resolutions intersecting with religion and belief for the promotion of human rights, peaceful coexistence, inclusion and the rule of law. Declarations and resolutions reflect, respond to or build on important global developments, international standards and UN mechanisms.

The IPU has long recognized parliamentary diplomacy as an instrument for building bridges of trust, cooperation and exchange between parliaments and parliamentarians. It was identified at the 116th IPU Assembly (Nusa Dua, Bali, 2007) as an important tool for issues intersecting with religion or belief. The resulting resolution, *Ensuring respect for and peaceful co-existence between all religious communities and beliefs in a globalized world*, includes the following recommendations regarding the role of inter-parliamentary cooperation:

- Expresses the need for a more intensive inter-parliamentary exchange of information and experience in respect of the implementation of effective measures in this field, and stresses the supportive role played by the IPU;
- Urges parliaments and parliamentarians to establish and strengthen parliamentary dialogue among civilizations and cultures, within the framework of the IPU and the various inter-parliamentary assemblies they participate in, and through bilateral initiatives such as the establishment of inter-parliamentary friendship groups.

Parliamentary diplomacy: Building bridges for peace and understanding, the declaration endorsed by the 148th IPU Assembly (Geneva, 2024), recognized the potential of parliamentary diplomacy as a peacebuilding tool, especially stating: “We advocate for holistic dialogue processes that involve representatives of religions, beliefs and faith-based organizations to effectively complement existing efforts to mitigate violence and promote peace, inclusion and understanding.”

Parliamentary conferences and their commitments

Responding to the wish of the IPU Members to hold an international conference on interfaith dialogue, as well as sharing concern about the state of global conflict and mindful of the importance of collective efforts to promote peaceful coexistence and inclusion, the Parliament of the Kingdom of Morocco hosted the first Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue: *Working together for our common future* in Marrakesh in June 2023, under the auspices of HM King Mohammed VI of Morocco.³ The conference was organized by the IPU together with the national parliament, in cooperation with Religions for Peace and supported by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and the Mohammadia League of Religious Scholars.

The Speaker of the Moroccan House of Representatives, Mr. Rachid Talbi Alami, and the then President of the House of Councillors, Mr. Enaam Mayara, summarized Morocco’s motivation to hold the conference:

“We are working in unison to ensure that the cultural specificities and the beliefs of everyone can be expressed in perfect harmony with the universality that people are seeking and calling for all over the world. The tradition of tolerance and inter-ethnic and interfaith coexistence is a hallmark of civilization and an essential pillar of the intangible heritage of the Kingdom of Morocco. [...] The unprecedented upsurge in identity-based isolationism and interfaith conflicts around the world makes this conference all the more topical. Our work as parliamentarians links us closely to the peoples we represent, and in this capacity we have the political and moral responsibility to promote the ideals of peace and understanding that the people who vote for us hope will be nurtured throughout future generations.”⁴

The Kingdom of Morocco has a long history of engagement in interfaith dialogue and the promotion of religious freedom. The visit of Pope John Paul II to Morocco in 1985 was the first by a Pope to a Muslim country. Pope Francis visited 34 years later in 2019. The *Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence*, was named after the city in which the final consultation of the UN-led process took place in 2012. The *Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in the Muslim World* from 2016, signed by over 250 Muslim scholars, religious leaders and political leaders, provides guidance around citizenship in Muslim States, based on an early Islamic constitutional document, the Charter of Medina. The UNAOC held its ninth Global Forum in 2022 in Fez, producing the Fez Declaration.

³ The conference was inspired by the St. Petersburg Declaration, *Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue*, from the 137th IPU Assembly in 2017.

⁴ Joint letter addressed to the IPU President on 5 May 2022 [IPU translation of original French].



The first Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue concluded with the Marrakesh Communiqué, which provides a road map for the IPU's engagement with religion or belief in the future. © IPU

The 2023 Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue attracted over 700 participants, including representatives of over 70 national parliaments. In line with the “ecosystem” approach promoted by the IPU’s 2022-2026 Strategy, encouraging parliaments to engage with different actors relevant to their work, the delegates also included representatives of religions and beliefs, the UN, international, faith-based and civil society organizations, and academia.

The conference programme explored a breadth of issues important to parliamentarians and religious and belief communities for fostering peaceful, just and cohesive societies, including: interfaith and intrafaith dialogue; promotion of the rule of law and freedom of religion or belief; religion and belief in secular systems; cooperation with faith-based organizations to advance inclusion and solidarity; promoting gender equality and youth participation; and countering hate speech, incitement to violence and digital challenges to democracy.

The conference concluded with the Marrakesh Communiqué, in which parliamentarians affirmed that “interfaith dialogue that is grounded in support of fundamental rights and freedoms is an essential tool for promoting inclusivity and peaceful coexistence, upholding the rule of law and encouraging collective efforts to achieve a better society.” It provides a road map for the IPU’s engagement with religion or belief in the future.

The present report is being launched in conjunction with the Second Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue, due to be held in Rome in June 2025 during the Jubilee Year of the Catholic Church.

Organized by the IPU together with the Italian Parliament and in cooperation with Religions for Peace, the conference aims to evaluate the outcomes of the Marrakesh Communiqué in light of global developments and invites delegates to consider how parliamentarians can meaningfully engage with religion and belief to provide new horizons of hope.

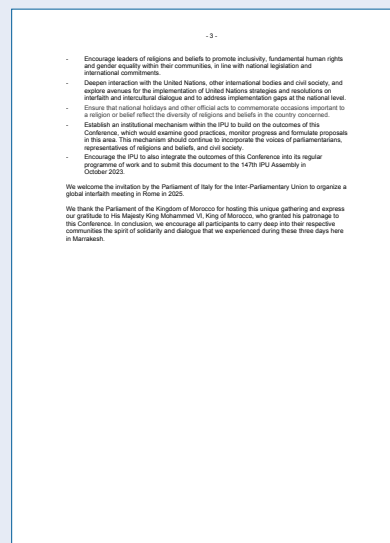
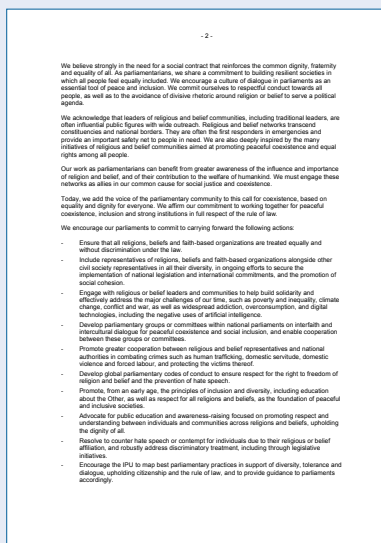
Senator Pier Ferdinando Casini, former IPU President (2005–2008) and President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies (2001–2006), championed the conference. Addressing parliamentarians during the 148th IPU Assembly in 2024 he said:

“Efforts to foster interfaith dialogue and freedom of religion or belief have always been a political priority for parliaments and their ability to bring people closer together and combine the many voices of our complex societies. Indeed, the main and most typical aspect of the political approach of parliaments lies in their emphasis on dialogue which is neither an end in itself nor proof of weakness in one’s convictions. It is an essential tool to meet the other, become aware of differences and strive to reconcile them.”

Against the backdrop of the increasingly fragmented global political situation, Mr. Casini stressed the urgency for collective action in order to promote dialogue, as an essential tool for the construction of peaceful and inclusive societies, and in order to create an environment of hope and trust as a sign of reconciliation between people. He also underlined the need to do more to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief, quoting Pope John Paul II, who had called the defence of this right the “litmus test for the respect of all the other human rights”

In the Marrakesh Communiqué, parliamentarians encourage their parliaments to commit to carrying forward the following actions:⁵

- Ensure that all religions, beliefs and faith-based organizations are treated equally and without discrimination under the law.
- Include representatives of religions, beliefs and faith-based organizations alongside other civil society representatives in all their diversity, in ongoing efforts to secure the implementation of national legislation and international commitments, and the promotion of social cohesion.
- Engage with religious or belief leaders and communities to help build solidarity and effectively address the major challenges of our time, such as poverty and inequality, climate change, conflict and war, as well as widespread addiction, overconsumption, and digital technologies, including the negative uses of artificial intelligence.
- Develop parliamentary groups or committees within national parliaments on interfaith and intercultural dialogue for peaceful coexistence and social inclusion, and enable cooperation between these groups or committees.
- Promote greater cooperation between religious and belief representatives and national authorities in combating crimes such as human trafficking, domestic servitude, domestic violence and forced labour, and protecting the victims thereof.
- Develop global parliamentary codes of conduct to ensure respect for the right to freedom of religion and belief and the prevention of hate speech.
- Promote, from an early age, the principles of inclusion and diversity, including education about the Other, as well as respect for all religions and beliefs, as the foundation of peaceful and inclusive societies.
- Advocate for public education and awareness-raising focused on promoting respect and understanding between individuals and communities across religions and beliefs, upholding the dignity of all.
- Resolve to counter hate speech or contempt for individuals due to their religious or belief affiliation, and robustly address discriminatory treatment, including through legislative initiatives.
- Encourage the IPU to map best parliamentary practices in support of diversity, tolerance and dialogue, upholding citizenship and the rule of law, and to provide guidance to parliaments accordingly.
- Encourage leaders of religions and beliefs to promote inclusivity, fundamental human rights and gender equality within their communities, in line with national legislation and international commitments.
- Deepen interaction with the United Nations, other international bodies and civil society, and explore avenues for the implementation of United Nations strategies and resolutions on interfaith and intercultural dialogue and to address implementation gaps at the national level.
- Ensure that national holidays and other official acts to commemorate occasions important to a religion or belief reflect the diversity of religions and beliefs in the country concerned.
- Establish an institutional mechanism within the IPU to build on the outcomes of this Conference, which would examine good practices, monitor progress and formulate proposals in this area. This mechanism should continue to incorporate the voices of parliamentarians, representatives of religions and beliefs, and civil society.
- Encourage the IPU to also integrate the outcomes of this Conference into its regular programme of work and to submit this document to the 147th IPU Assembly in October 2023.



5 For the full text of the Marrakesh Communiqué, see [IPU, 2023](#).



© 1-2/IPU; 3-4/IAO; 5-6/Rabbi Alex Goldberg; 7/National Assembly of the Federal Republic of Nigeria



Interview with IPU President Dr. Tulia Ackson (United Republic of Tanzania)

Dr. Tulia Ackson became a parliamentarian in 2015. Before this she served as the Associate Dean and then Senior Lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam School of Law. In 2022 she was appointed to the position of Speaker of the Bunge, the National Assembly of the United Republic of Tanzania, after a period as Deputy Speaker. Dr. Ackson also served as Deputy Attorney General in 2015. At the 147th IPU Assembly in Luanda in October 2023, she was elected as the 31st IPU President by the Governing Council.

How does Tanzania manage its religious and belief landscape?

The founding principles of my own country of Tanzania are freedom, justice, fraternity and concord.

Tanzania is a religious mosaic: around two thirds of the population are Christian and one third Muslim. There are Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are Sunni, Ismaili, Twelver Shiite, Ibadi and Ahmadi Muslims. We also have Buddhists, Hindus, Bahá'ís, Sikhs, people practising traditional religions and people of no belief.

This diversity enriches our society but it can lead to conflicts within and between religions, especially between newer and more traditional interpretations of the one religion. Intrafaith relations can be an especially hot potato, sometimes more than interfaith.

I see this partly as a problem of religious literacy: when people lack proper understanding of their own or others' belief systems, they can make negative assumptions or be suspicious.

One way we foster concord is through interfaith committees at the national, provincial and district levels. These are platforms where different religions and beliefs can meet and discuss their differences. The committees play an important role in conflict mitigation. Through promoting a culture of dialogue, they also foster fraternity and sorority.

Do you think it is important for parliaments to engage with religion or belief in their work?

Yes. Religion and belief permeate all levels of society, and freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed under the law. Parliamentarians, as representatives, must be in touch with the values of their constituents, and national MPs must also have an eye for the social cohesion of the nation as a whole. Religious leaders can be important interlocutors for MPs, especially in a country like Tanzania where people tend to be religious. Engaging them belongs to an inclusive approach, just as we must also engage with civil society and academia.

It is especially my desire that parliaments be inclusive spaces, where society as a whole is heard as well as represented, including parliamentarians in their religious and belief diversity. That is not, however, a carte blanche for bringing one's religion into politics. Respect for human rights, human dignity and the upholding of the rule of law, which applies to all citizens equally, is the golden standard.

Politicians sometimes preach divisions in religious language. What tools would you suggest to counter this?

Education and dialogue. Education is a powerful tool to emancipate people from ignorance and foster, at the very least, tolerance, and at best respect and acceptance. Education is a lifelong process, and we parliamentarians should be continually learning and growing.

Dialogue involves hearing and being heard, it challenges us to walk in each other's shoes.

Our world is very divided, and unfortunately some political leaders preach divisions in the name of religion or belief, or against religious or belief communities. Through religious literacy, appreciation of our common dignity and values, and dialogue, we will be better able to counter divisive rhetoric and hate speech when we hear it, and ensure our own communication is sensitive and respectful.



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Religious symbols and concepts of interfaith dialogue and spirituality.© GODONG/BSIP/AFP

1. Understanding and upholding freedom of religion or belief

“Parliamentarians need to be equipped, need to have the literacy and training in human rights and freedom of religion or belief to pass better laws and to identify when a law can be threatening to freedom of religion or belief.”

Ms. Fernanda San Martin Carrasco, Director, International Panel of Parliamentarians on Freedom of Religion or Belief, former Member of the Plurinational Legislative Assembly of Bolivia

The right to freely choose, change and manifest a religion or belief is protected under international law. Provisions on freedom of religion or belief are also present in constitutional texts. Nevertheless, this right is frequently not applied fully or equally to all citizens and non-citizens. Religious or belief minorities, religiously unaffiliated persons, those whose religion or belief differs from that of the state ideology, migrants, refugees, stateless persons, women and other marginalized groups are especially vulnerable to having the full exercise of their rights limited. Limitations on freedom of religion or belief can impact conversion, inheritance, birth and death certificates, legal citizenship status, worship, religious instruction, and many matters under family law.

1.1. International standards

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is outlined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and further articulated in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Together, the UDHR, the ICCPR and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) make up the International Bill of Human Rights. The two covenants entered into force in 1976.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is more commonly referred to as “freedom of religion or belief”, constituting an abbreviation of the language of the ICCPR and commonly referred to internationally by the acronym “FoRB”.⁶

The right to religion or belief has two components: the internal aspect (*forum internum*) and the external aspect (*forum externum*).

Forum internum includes the right to form and hold opinions based on conscience. It protects the right to espouse a religion or belief of one’s choice, the right not to espouse a religion or belief, and the right to reject or change a religion or belief, free from coercion. This enjoys absolute protection and is non-derogable.

Forum externum describes a person’s right to publicly express or display their religion or belief, individually or as part of a community, such as through clothing, religious symbols, worship, teaching and other practices. The State can only impose restrictions on the external manifestation of religion or belief in exceptional situations, and with a high threshold of evidence required to enforce limitations.⁷

FoRB is also covered by other UN Conventions, including Article 4 of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951, Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, and Article 12 of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families of 1990.

The 1981 *Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief* was the first UN document dedicated to FoRB.⁸ The 1992 UN *Declaration on the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities* addressed FoRB through the minority lens.⁹

UN Human Rights Committee General comment No. 22 on Article 18, adopted at the 48th session of the Human Rights Committee in 1993, provides guidance for States on how to interpret Article 18 of the ICCPR.¹⁰

FoRB is further protected in regional conventions and treaties, including: the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950); the American Convention on Human Rights (1969); the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (1981); the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000); and the Arab Charter on Human Rights (2004).¹¹

Key sources of international law

Article 18 of the UDHR (1948):

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 18 of the ICCPR (1966; entry into force 1976):

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.
4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

1.2. UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

The mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief was established by the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) in 1986.

The mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief¹²

- To promote the adoption of measures at the national, regional and international levels to ensure the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- To identify existing and emerging obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief and present recommendations on ways and means to overcome such obstacles;
- To continue her/his efforts to examine incidents and governmental actions that are incompatible with the provisions of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and to recommend remedial measures as appropriate;
- To continue to apply a gender perspective, inter alia, through the identification of gender-specific abuses, in the reporting process, including in information collection and in recommendations.

⁶ In the United States, it is known as IRF, the acronym deriving from the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. Since the USA is active in many international efforts to protect freedom of religion or belief, both acronyms are widely used.

⁷ [Christian Solidarity Worldwide \(CSW\), 2018](#).

⁸ [UNGA, 1981](#).

⁹ [UNGA, 1992](#).

¹⁰ [UN Human Rights Committee, 1993](#).

¹¹ [CSW, 2018](#).

¹² [UN Human Rights Council, 2007; OHCHR, \[no date\]](#).

The exercise of this mandate takes place through issuing communications to States regarding hindrances to the exercise of FoRB, conducting fact-finding missions, and submitting annual thematic reports to the UN Human Rights Council in March and to the UN General Assembly in October.

The themes chosen by the current mandate holder, Nazila Ghanea, for the annual reports include:

- Landscape of freedom of religion or belief (2023)
- Freedom of religion or belief, from the grass-roots level (2023)
- Advocacy of hatred based on religion or belief (2024)
- Peace and freedom of religion or belief (2024)
- Freedom of religion or belief and the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (2025).

Ms. Ghanea has consistently addressed parliaments in her reports and has described the engagement with parliaments and parliamentary networks as a priority. She is engaged with the IPU as well as with several parliamentary networks referred to in this chapter.

A number of the recommendations and observations expressed by present and past mandate holders are relevant for the work of parliaments. A valuable resource in this regard is the publication *Rapporteur's digest on freedom of religion or belief*, which includes excerpts of the reports from 1986 to 2022 by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, arranged by topics of the framework for communications.¹³

Dr. Nazila Ghanea, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

Dr. Nazila Ghanea is Professor of International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford. In 2022, she assumed the mandate of UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. Her academic work has often connected with multilateral practice in international human rights law. She has contributed actively to networks interested in freedom of religion or belief and its interrelationship with other human rights and has advised States and other stakeholders.

What contribution can parliamentarians make to upholding freedom of religion or belief?

In every society, without exception, there are violations happening on the basis of religion or belief.

My mandate has communicated instances of where the protection of law enforcement and government authorities falls short. Sometimes the government authorities are at the forefront of encouraging and participating in such violence or in the intimidation of lawyers and judges advocating for the rights of people marginalized because of their religion or belief. The climate of intolerance, which motivates these situations, provides fertile ground for populist and intolerant views against minorities and can sometimes prove profitable at the ballot box.

One of the tasks of parliaments is to guarantee the upholding of the rule of law, which is essential for upholding the human rights of all, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief.

Parliaments and parliamentarians are a cadre of governmental authorities that are deeply engaged at the grassroots and can make a very concrete and tangible impact on this field.

Parliamentarians have public profiles that can be a vital bulwark against intolerance. This requires courage and bravery, to stand up

for the rights and safety and well-being of those whom we may disagree with on theological or belief grounds and sometimes on very fundamental issues, yet are our equals in our shared humanity and enjoy dignity.

It starts with ensuring that the legal order, of which parliamentarians are the custodians, is non-discriminatory on the basis of religion or belief and that religions and beliefs are treated equally under the law. We need to allow the existence, and enjoyment, of the activities and the practices of these religious and belief communities.

In order to combat everyday prejudice, which can be exercised with impunity by civil servants, including at the local level, parliamentarians are well placed to develop laws and protocols to ensure that rights holders have avenues for redress and legal accountability.

Along with religious and belief communities, parliamentarians can develop awareness-raising opportunities, educational and training processes, including for state authorities such as the judiciary, law enforcement and municipal authorities, to address the attitudes, which are often the root causes of the everyday violations of freedom of religion or belief around the world.



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1.3. Regional and international parliamentary engagement with freedom of religion or belief

Parliaments and parliamentarians can engage in the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief in a number of ways.

Declarations and resolutions have been adopted by multilateral parliamentary bodies offering guidance for national parliaments in the upholding of FoRB, including:

- *Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Human Rights*, ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Organization (AIPO) (1993)
- *Ensuring respect for and peaceful coexistence between all religious communities and beliefs in a globalized world*. Resolution, 116th IPU Assembly (Nusa Dua, Bali, 2007)
- *Safeguarding human rights in relation to religion and belief, and protecting religious communities from violence*. Resolution 1928, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) (2013), and other PACE statements
- *Freedom of expression and freedom of religion: The religious pluralism in the Mediterranean region*. Resolution, Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) (2017).

Sitting parliamentarians can engage with matters relating to FoRB formally in standing parliamentary committees or informally in cross-party caucuses. Additionally current and former parliamentarians can participate in dedicated human rights or FoRB networks.

International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB)

The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) is a non-partisan, non-governmental network of sitting and former parliamentarians committed to promoting and protecting FoRB worldwide.

The IPPFoRB was launched in 2014 through the signing of the Oslo Charter for Freedom of Religion or Belief by a group of 30 parliamentarians from around the world.¹⁴ The Oslo Charter is a one-page document recognizing the widespread prevalence of violations of FoRB around the world by state and non-state actors, as well as the increasing recognition of this problem by governments and non-government entities. It commits the signatories to promoting FoRB through their work, enhancing global cooperation around FoRB and undertaking collective action and information-sharing to promote FoRB. The core values of the network are equality, non-discrimination and diversity.

Today, the IPPFoRB represents a network of more than 400 former and sitting parliamentarians from 97 countries. Its work is overseen by a steering committee and its day-to-day work is conducted by a secretariat, under a director. It is housed within Stefanus Alliance International in Oslo, Norway, and is funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other donors.

IPPFoRB activities are designed to support parliamentarians in the promotion and protection of FoRB through capacity-building, network-building and advocacy. It engages relevant experts and stakeholders, such as civil society and the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

“As parliamentarians, we must use our influence and voice to move forward the protection and promotion of this human right, not only in our own countries but also globally.”

Mr. Abid Raja, Chair of the IPPFoRB Steering Group and Member of the Stortinget (Norwegian Parliament)

Examples of IPPFoRB activities:

- Develop toolkits and reports; hold dialogue events, workshops, regional consultations and international conferences; produce podcasts.
- Conduct fact-finding missions and engage in advocacy to government authorities on FoRB violations.
- Design and deliver training on FoRB for members via an annual academy. It also offers training on FoRB in relation to other human rights, the SDGs, democracy and the climate crisis.
- Issue resolutions through high-level conferences. These are signed by parliamentarians in their personal capacity and not on behalf of their parliaments.

The IPPFoRB has established networks in Southeast Asia, Africa and Southeast Europe. Preparations are under way to launch an IPPFoRB Latin America network.

Fernanda San Martin Carrasco, IPPFoRB Director and former Member of the Plurinational Legislative Assembly of Bolivia



Fernanda San Martin Carrasco offers guidance for parliamentarians who wish to be active in FoRB promotion:

“Building democracy is a joint task. A good relationship between civil society and parliament is important to enhance the quality of democracy. Building trust between civil society and parliamentarians is crucial to achieving and advancing our mutual goals.”

© IPPFoRB

One of the areas where trust has been undermined over the years has been between politicians in general and civil society. We need to reconnect parliamentarians and politics to civil society to have a joint goal in defending and advancing freedom of religion or belief for all.

Some things that we need to focus on when we talk about FoRB are that: (1) Human rights are interdependent and indivisible. One set of rights cannot be enjoyed fully without the other; (2) Human rights protect individuals, people – FoRB doesn’t protect a specific religion or a specific belief. That is important in the construction of pluralism and diversity; (3) The goal is not to tolerate someone, it is to appreciate and to give room to diversity, to plurality.”

14 [IPPFoRB, 2014](#).

IPPFoRB Southeast Asia network

Despite the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration providing a framework to protect FoRB, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) did not deal with FoRB in practice before 2019. An inter-parliamentary initiative played a pioneering role here.

The IPPFoRB Southeast Asia network (initially known as Southeast Asia Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (SEAPFoRB)) was established in 2017 as a network of sitting and former parliamentarians committed to promoting and protecting FoRB and countering hate speech in Southeast Asia.¹⁵ It comprised members from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Timor-Leste. It was initially a partnership between ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) – an inter-parliamentary network for advancing human rights in Southeast Asia, which also has a FoRB committee in its structure – and the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Since 2019, the partnership has been continued by the APHR and the IPPFoRB.

The network has provided a legal analysis for, and proposed direct amendments to, a draft bill on hate speech that was tabled during the 18th Congress (2019-2022) of the Parliament of the Philippines. In 2021, it organized a training session for MPs on campaigns to counter hatred against minorities in Indonesia.¹⁶

In 2023, the IPPFoRB, with the APHR, undertook a parliamentary fact-finding mission to Malaysia to assess the current state of religious harmony and social cohesion in the country, particularly during and after the general election in 2022 and state elections in 2023. The delegation met with civil society organizations, faith leaders and parliamentarians, as well as representatives from ministries and national commissions. In 2024, the APHR, with the IPPFoRB, published the *Toolkit for parliamentarians: Promoting an inclusive Malaysian society through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process*.

In 2024, IPPFoRB/APHR members adopted the *Jakarta Declaration to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Southeast Asia*.¹⁷

IPPFoRB Africa

IPPFoRB Africa began with the African Parliamentarians Association for Human Rights (AfriPAHR) and the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA) as strategic partners in the field.

The network counts 97 members from 25 countries. Its activities span advocacy, fact-finding and country missions, and human rights training on FoRB and other human rights issues. In several African parliaments it has supported the establishment of caucuses on FoRB, which facilitate cross-party and inter-parliamentary peer-to-peer communication around FoRB promotion and protection.¹⁸



Parliamentarians from Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, and the Gambia during the workshop on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) toolkit organized by ACEPA and IPPFoRB in November 2024. © IPPFoRB

¹⁵ SEAPFoRB, [no date].

¹⁶ Desi Hanara, 2023: 110.

¹⁷ IPPFoRB and APHR, 2024.

¹⁸ ACEPA, 2023b.

Nqabayomzi Kwankwa, Member of the National Assembly of South Africa and Chair of the AfriPAHR Steering Committee, speaks of the importance of the AfriPAHR network for the consolidation of human rights specific to the African context:

“Fifty years after many African countries celebrated freedom from colonialism, many African countries have hardened into autocracies, leaving the peoples of Africa to face criminalization of FoRB and other rights. In many parts of the continent, the universality and indivisibility of human rights is still contested, questioned and often treated as a Western construct or unwelcome inconvenience. This is quite ironic given that African leaders fighting for the liberation of their countries used human rights as the fundamental basis of their cause. While there are some working for FoRB in Africa, it has largely been overlooked or forgotten to this point.”¹⁹

The IPPFoRB has customized the toolkit for parliamentarians on the UPR process to the African context; this is due to be published soon.

IPPFoRB Southeast Europe network (IPPFoRB SEE)

In 2024, the IPPFoRB launched its Southeast Europe network (IPPFoRB SEE) at the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, following years of active involvement of parliamentarians from the West Balkans region and some preliminary activities. In 2021, the IPPFoRB produced a report, *Strengthening the protection of freedom of religion or belief in Western Balkans: A roadmap for parliamentarians*, and in 2022 it held a workshop on the Western Balkans.

During the network launch in 2024, parliamentarians from the West Balkans region spoke of the importance of a dedicated FoRB network and of the role parliamentarians must play in defending FoRB in the region, which is characterized by ethno-religious diversity. Sabina Ćudić, member of the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, said:

“In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in our region, freedom of religion or belief is not typically portrayed as merely one dimension of human rights. Instead, it is a matter of both individual and collective survival, as well as a fundamental right to life. As parliamentarians, we cannot prioritize one human right over another; supporting one entails supporting all human rights without discrimination. In our regional context, it is imperative to move beyond stereotypes and prejudices, crossing boundaries for a more inclusive understanding.”

Amadou Camara, MP from the Gambia

Mr. Amadou Camara is a member of the National Assembly of the Gambia, where he is co-founder and Chair of Gambia’s Parliamentary Caucus on Freedom of Religion and Belief. The Gambia was the first country in Africa to have such a caucus in parliament. Mr. Camara is active in the IPPFoRB and is also on the AfriPAHR Steering Committee, a member of the ECOWAS Parliament and head of the parliamentary delegation of the National Assembly of the Gambia to the Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States (PUIC). Mr. Camara believes that multilateral and multi-stakeholder dialogue and commitment, combined with community engagement, are necessary for effective FoRB promotion.

“Achieving real change will require international collaboration on freedom of religion or belief, involving not only governments but also civil society organizations, which are so often at the forefront of reporting religious freedom abuses. That is why civil society engagement in this dialogue is so critical and important. There must also be political will and enduring commitment from the highest levels of government if we want to effectively achieve freedom of religion or belief. That will need to be backed up by real resources. We need to find ways to prevent violations of freedom of religion or belief, working with religious communities to discover flashpoints. We must seek to identify and disarm sources of tension. We need to build resilience and encourage and foster dialogue. In the Gambia, as parliamentarians we have established a caucus that is principally focusing on freedom of religion or belief and we have monthly constituency engagement to go out to communities and discuss the issues of freedom of religion and belief and peaceful coexistence among community members.”

Article 18 Alliance: Dedicated envoys and ambassadors

The Article 18 Alliance – originally called the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) founded in 2020 – is a network of 38 States working together to advance religious freedom and jointly voice concerns about violations of FoRB, persecution and discrimination.²⁰ Membership is open to UN Member or observer States that endorse the IRFBA Declaration of Principles, which is grounded in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).²¹ In addition, each member government must appoint a dedicated ambassador or envoy.

The Alliance operates through working groups on matters such as atrocity prevention, education, cultural and religious heritage, and interfaith dialogue. In addition, it issues statements supporting individual faith groups who are being discriminated against on the basis of their religion or belief, including non-belief.

¹⁹ Jim Shannon, 2018: 309.

²⁰ There are also five “friends” – States that are considering joining the Alliance and are permitted to participate in certain activities – and three “observers”. See: [Article 18 Alliance, \[no date\]](#).

²¹ [US DoS, 2024a](#).

While the Alliance is an office tied to the executive, its legitimization and even post-holders are frequently tied to parliaments.

- The 1998 *International Religious Freedom Act* (IRFA) passed by the US Congress called for the establishment of an Office on International Religious Freedom within the US Department of State, and an Ambassador-at-Large to head this office.²² The Ambassador-at-Large, designated by the President by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, must submit annual reports on international religious freedom to Congress. The 2016 *Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act* amended the 1998 Act by specifically extending protection to those who did not affiliate with any religion.
- In the United Kingdom, the Special Envoys for Freedom of Religion or Belief have all been members of the UK Parliament. The previous Special Envoy, Fiona Bruce, was also Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- In Germany, the Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief has been a sitting member of the Bundestag (German Parliament) since the position was created in 2018.

In the UK and Germany, the position of the government representative for religious freedom is not permanent. In May 2024, Fiona Bruce submitted the *Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief Bill*, calling for the “continued appointment of a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief.”²³ The Bill underwent three readings in the House of Commons and a first reading in the House of Lords. However, its progress was stalled when Parliament was dissolved following the announcement of a general election in July 2024. The Bill was resubmitted by MP Jim Shannon in October 2024.²⁴

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

“State action is needed to protect freedom of religion or belief. Through their work, their oversight responsibilities, and their budgetary powers, parliamentarians can help to ensure that States safeguard this right for everyone.”

Dr. Susan Kerr, Senior Advisor for Freedom of Religion or Belief, OSCE/ODIHR

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has two dedicated FoRB officers housed in the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The FoRB programme’s mandate is to assist participating States in implementing their OSCE commitments and other international standards relating to FoRB. ODIHR support is often relevant for parliaments, as it: reviews legislation; provides expert opinions on issues related to FoRB; develops and disseminates guidance on FoRB; and monitors key developments affecting FoRB in the OSCE area.²⁵ The ODIHR

is assisted in its work by the panel of experts on FoRB, which consists of 16 independent experts from across the OSCE region. The 2024 publication, *Belief, dialogue and security*, is a resource for OSCE participating States containing guidance for creating a platform for dialogue and joint action across religious and belief boundaries that increases security, including through upholding FoRB.²⁶ The OSCE also has a department working on tolerance and non-discrimination, which focuses on combating hate crime and other forms of intolerance, including against Christians, Muslims and members of other religions, and anti-Semitism. The OSCE Chairperson-in-Office has three personal representatives covering these same topics.²⁷ The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly also has a Special Representative on Anti-Semitism, Racism and Intolerance.

Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network (FoRBLN)

The Freedom of Religion or Belief Leadership Network (FoRBLN), launched in 2020, is a project which connects parliamentarians and religious or belief leaders from the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Malawi, United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Bangladesh and Pakistan, and is dedicated to supporting the right to freedom of religion or belief, as set out in Article 18 of the UDHR, in their local and national contexts. Its overarching aim is to improve knowledge of FoRB and access to it, and to reduce discrimination against people on the grounds of their religion or belief. The network has two hubs, in West Africa and South Asia.

The FoRBLN is led by the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion (CSSC) at the School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford and is supported by a consortium of 11 partners. It received funding from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office until 2022, after which its work was carried on by the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA) and the IPPFoRB.

The FoRBLN focuses on engaging parliamentarians and religious and belief leaders, who CSSC director Harvey Whitehouse describes as “*barrier-crossing leaders*”, saying that they “*have a vital role to play in tackling sectarianism and religious intolerance. This kind of leadership can increase the prospect of cooperation not just within but also across the many interest groups that struggle for survival in the world’s most fragile States.*”²⁸

Under the auspices of the FoRBLN project, ACEPA has, in the last five years, worked collaboratively with the Church of England, the University of Oxford, the IPPFoRB and AfriPAHR to implement a number of FoRB initiatives in select African parliaments. As the lead implementing organization in the consortium, ACEPA was involved with the establishment of cross-party FoRB parliamentary caucuses in the Gambia (December 2022); Sierra Leone (January 2023); Malawi (April 2023); and Ghana (November 2023). Preparations are under way to establish a similar caucus in the Parliament of South Africa.

²² [US Congress, 1998.](#)

²³ [UK House of Commons, 2024.](#)

²⁴ [UK House of Commons, 2025.](#)

²⁵ [OSCE, \[no date\]b.](#)

²⁶ [OSCE/ODIHR, 2024.](#)

²⁷ [OSCE, \[no date\]a.](#)

²⁸ [University of Oxford, 2020.](#)

These parliamentary caucuses are meant to be the convening points drawing faith leaders, civil society actors, and other key FoRB stakeholders to pool their strengths to advance human rights issues in their respective countries. The caucuses should advocate for and influence the passing of legislation that would advance FoRB issues. ACEPA has also organized several FoRB-related training sessions and events at the national and constituency levels across the different countries, all aimed at fostering social cohesion and religious harmony.²⁹

FoRB resources for MPs

The FoRB Learning Platform provides a variety of courses, learning resources and training materials on FoRB for parliamentarians, diplomats, civil society and local communities.³⁰ Resources particularly useful to parliamentarians include 8 short videos (available in over 20 languages) explaining different dimensions of FoRB and the rules regarding when the State may legitimately limit the right. The platform also provides short on-demand courses (*FORB for all* and *FORB and gender equality*) that can help parliamentarians deepen their understanding. A version of these courses tailored to European Union (EU) staff is also available.³¹ For those providing training on FoRB for parliamentarians, the *FORB facilitators' toolkit* includes over 70 participatory exercises and accompanying case studies. In some contexts, parliamentarians join other members of the community in learning about FoRB using the *Local changemakers course* (available in multiple languages) – a downloadable set of course materials that can be used by any competent facilitator to help communities learn about, value and promote FoRB at community level. The platform's

dedicated page for decision makers also includes links to guidance on specific legislative and thematic areas such as hate speech, security, legal personality for religious and belief communities and more.³²

1.4. Freedom of religion or belief and sustainable development

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are grounded in human rights and driven by a central commitment to “leave no one behind.” The promotion and protection of FoRB is paramount to achieving the SDGs, not merely for building more just and inclusive societies but also for creating an environment where religious actors and faith-based organizations, as important contributors towards sustainable development, can thrive.

In 2021–2022 a high-level dialogue series, *Leave no one behind: Freedom of religion or belief and the Sustainable Development Goals*, was launched by the FoRBLN, the IPPFoRB, Religions for Peace, AfriPAHR, the OHCHR “Faith for Rights” initiative, and the Danish Institute for Human Rights.³³ The dialogue series engaged parliamentarians and religious and belief leaders from Africa, Europe, South Asia and Southeast Asia around themes that intersected with FoRB and the SDGs, including gender, education, civic spaces, expression, health and climate change.

Leave No One Behind: Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Sustainable Development Goals
High-level Dialogue Series

Thursday 23 September 2021	Applying a FoRB lens to achieve the SDGs
Thursday 14 October 2021	Gender & FoRB: opportunities for synergies and learning
Thursday 11 November 2021	Education & FoRB: nurturing future generations for inclusive societies
Thursday 9 December 2021	Rule of Law & SDGs: the role of religious/non-religious expression
Thursday 20 January 2022	Health & FoRB: pandemic, exclusion & marginalisation
Thursday 24 February 2022	Adapting for climate change: how can FoRB help protect against climate impact

Logos: IPPFORB, Religions for Peace, AfriPAHR, FoRB, FAITH RIGHTS

29 ACEPA, 2023a; ACEPA, 2023c.
30 FoRB Learning Platform, 2025b.
31 FoRB Learning Platform, 2025a.
32 FoRB Learning Platform, 2025c.
33 IPPFoRB, 2021.

The **International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)** convenes governments, multilateral entities, academia, religious and other civil society actors to amplify contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and make them visible at a global level. PaRD facilitates workstreams and taskforces and offers over 170 members a safe space for global dialogue, learning, sharing of good practices and evidence, and collaboration to better inform policy and practices through recommendations and guidelines for practitioners. The SDGs set the foundation of PaRD's work. Fundamental human rights principles, including FoRB, form the basis of PaRD. A dedicated workstream to advance FoRB was established in 2021, operating on the three thematic pillars of good practices, capacity development and engagement.

A public statement issued following the first dialogue series, *Applying a FoRB lens to achieve the SDGs*, was endorsed by more than 100 signatories, including current and former parliamentarians, as well as representatives of religions and beliefs, and other experts.³⁴ The statement underscored the fact that the promotion and protection of FoRB was vital for achieving the sustainable development goals:

“Recognizing that to leave no one behind, religious or belief communities’ experiences of inequality and needs must be integrated into SDG planning, policy and action at a country level [...] We commit to seek and listen to peoples’ experiences of inequality because of their religion or belief, to better understand their needs, and thereafter to advocate and work collaboratively in our countries to ensure that no one is left behind.”

Recommendations for parliaments and parliamentarians

- Ensure that national legislation is fully in line with international human rights standards around FoRB
- Support and make effective use of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief
- Consider the representative, legislative, budgetary and oversight work of parliament through an FoRB lens and host parliamentary hearings and briefing sessions on FoRB
- Engage with religious or belief leaders and communities to better understand their lived experiences, needs, and concerns
- Establish or participate in existing parliamentary committees or cross-party caucuses with a mandate to promote and protect FoRB
- Monitor violations of FoRB in the national context through reporting systems and parliamentary tools, and establish legal frameworks for redress and legal accountability
- Refrain from inciting, endorsing, or participating in violations of FoRB and speak out against any action that threatens FoRB
- Facilitate the awareness-raising and capacity-building of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff on FoRB and religious literacy, and advocate for public education and awareness-raising around this
- Strengthen FoRB advocacy and regional and international cooperation through participation in FoRB-focused human rights networks
- Promote the integration of FoRB into legislative and policymaking processes around the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Various members of PaRD engage with MPs on FoRB issues. These include:

Digni, a Norwegian faith-based umbrella organization for Norwegian development agencies, which produces educational material on FoRB and connects parliamentarians with experts on issues such as FoRB and gender equality, to ensure that they are well equipped to incorporate religious perspectives into development strategies, thereby strengthening their effectiveness and alignment with the SDGs.

Ojcos-Stiftung, a German foundation which has long-standing relationships with parliamentarians to promote the dignity and security of religious minorities, particularly in Iraq. Dialogues between Iraqi delegations and German lawmakers provide parliamentarians with first-hand accounts of the challenges faced by religious minorities, enabling informed policymaking. Additionally, Ojcos-Stiftung drafts policy recommendations and facilitates interfaith exchanges, fostering mutual understanding and supporting reconciliation efforts.

Tearfund Netherlands, which maintains regular contact with MPs to emphasize the role of religious actors in sustainable development. This has led to motions, parliamentary questions, and amendments that reflect shared priorities and strengthened government commitments to include religious actors in foreign affairs policies. The efforts of Tearfund Netherlands to enhance religious literacy among ministry staff and MPs have deepened understanding and improved policymaking. Their efforts contributed to the appointment of a Special Envoy for Religion or Belief and increased awareness of religious actors’ role in achieving the SDGs, notably through their participation in the “Adopt an SDG” campaign.

³⁴ [IPPFoRB and RFP, 2021](#). This statement was endorsed by current and former MPs from Bolivia, Canada, Gambia (the), Indonesia, Lesotho, Malaysia, Morocco, North Macedonia, Norway, Pakistan, Romania, Serbia, Singapore, South Africa, Switzerland, United Republic of Tanzania, Thailand, Timor Leste, Turkey, Uganda and Zambia.



Interview with Dr. Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi (United Arab Emirates)

Dr. Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi is a member of the Federal National Council of the United Arab Emirates for the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. An advocate of global peace, tolerance, and coexistence, Dr. Al Nuaimi serves as the Chair of the Steering Board of the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism (Hedayah), based in Abu Dhabi. He also founded and chairs the World Muslim Communities Council and was the first Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Elders. In March 2023, he founded the Manara Center for Coexistence and Dialogue and serves as its Chair.

What does interfaith coexistence look like in the United Arab Emirates?

The roots of Christianity and Judaism are in our region. They are part of our history and should be part of our future. When Sheikh Zayed became ruler of Abu Dhabi, the first place of worship he built was a church, not a mosque. Although Islam is the official religion, there is an acceptance and an appreciation of other religions. It is guaranteed in the constitution and laws of the country.

A major challenge to peaceful coexistence is hate narratives towards the Other. In the UAE, we have identified hate narratives as a threat to our national security. We have made it a priority to focus on countering hate, regardless of the source, the audience or the target.

Many interfaith initiatives have emerged from the UAE, such as the Muslim Elders Council, the Promoting Peace Forum, the Abrahamic Family House, Hedayah Center, and the Manara Center for Coexistence and Dialogue.

Why is it important or valuable for parliamentarians to engage with religion or belief?

Living in the 21st century, we see that our communities and societies, globally as well as regionally, are facing many challenges. We will not be able to counter these challenges and overcome them unless we work together, parliamentarians and religious leaders.

Religious leaders are influential leaders in their communities, and many are wise. They have a role to play. Either they will play their role through a partnership with parliamentarians and politicians or they will play a different role, which may be different from what you hope for. It is better that we engage with them and create a common and a shared partnership, a plan to work together to face the common challenges that we are facing as humanity.

The challenge for us parliamentarians is to be open-minded and show religious leaders that we appreciate them and to communicate that there is a role that they can play to bring the whole community together. They can be important players in building resilience within the community.

And parliamentarians can honour the contribution of religion and belief to promoting social cohesion.



© IPU

Parliamentarians in the UAE engage in many activities that promote faith-based coexistence. For example, 4 February is the International Day of Human Fraternity, as declared by the United Nations in 2020, and inspired by the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, that was signed by the late Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in 2019 in Abu Dhabi. Our Speaker issued a press release and he did an interview in honour of it. Many Members were engaged with the media to promote this day. When special events are held in churches, temples or gurdwaras, members of the Federal National Council also participate in these.

Should parliamentarians be promoting tolerance amongst different communities?

We prefer the word **تسامح** (tasāmuh) in Arabic to tolerance. It is hard to translate into English. My colleague, Hon. Dr. Mouza Al-Ameri, explains it well. She says: "It means I accept you as you are. I cannot judge you – I don't know your situation, your background or what you go through. Religion is very tied to tasāmuh because it obliges us to deal with ourselves. Once we can do that, we are better equipped to deal with others from a place of empathy." Tasāmuh is a kind of radical acceptance.

Diversity is part of every society and so you need to identify something that people would have in common to ensure security, stability and a cohesive society. That something is inclusive citizenship as a joint and unifying platform. In our common citizenship, we can live our diversity.



More than 3,400 devotees and volunteers take part in a large-scale Buddha bathing ceremony to mark Mother's Day in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on May 11, 2025. © Hari Anggara/NurPhoto/AFP

2. Responding to advocacy of hatred based on religion or belief

"To promote real democracy, we need to live in understanding and respect for the other. Hate speech needs to be abolished by the politicians and from political life."

Duarte Pacheco, Honorary President of the IPU and former Member of the Portuguese Parliament

2.1. Overview

Advocacy of hatred based on religion or belief is a form of hate speech which has been on the rise in recent years as societies become increasingly polarized, particularly driven by identity politics and global events. In this climate, parliamentarians are especially called upon to be responsible leaders and lawmakers and to work towards creating more peaceful, just and inclusive societies where the rule of law, human rights and justice prevail. Countering identity-based hatred is a priority.

There is no agreed international definition of what constitutes hate speech. In the context of the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (2019), the term "hate speech" is understood as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor."³⁵

Parliamentarians, in their function as legislators, must be able to delineate, legally, between speech acts that must lawfully be protected within the right to freedom of expression, and those which cross the threshold of incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, upon which grounds expression can be limited. Parliamentarians must also be mindful of the negative impact that hate speech can have on social cohesion, that it can be “lawful but awful.” In their representative function, they must also consider their personal and party rhetoric, as well as, on a policy level, options for countering hate speech and its underlying causes. When hatred is based on religion or belief, tensions can arise between religious and international standards for limitation of expression, especially around perceived blasphemy.

2.2. International standards

The right to freedom of opinion and expression is outlined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and further articulated in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The ICCPR has been ratified by 117 States and is legally binding upon them.

While the right to hold opinions cannot be restricted, Articles 19 and 20 make clear that freedom of expression is not an *absolute* right and can be subject to certain restrictions.

A three-part test for legitimately applying certain restrictions, derived from Article 19(3) of the ICCPR, specifies that any limitation to freedom of expression must be: (a) provided for by law; (2) pursue a legitimate aim; and (3) be necessary for a legitimate purpose.

As per Article 20(2), advocacy of hatred based on religion or belief shall be restricted when it reaches the threshold of incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. The 2018 IPU Handbook for Parliamentarians, *Freedom of expression for parliaments and their members: Importance and scope of protection*, indicates that the most problematic terms are “hatred” and “hostility”:

“The speech must incite to one of three results: discrimination, hostility or violence. Two of these – discrimination and violence – are specific acts (with discrimination normally being defined in national law but generally involving the denial of services or benefits). The third – hostility – is a state of mind and so inherently harder to observe or monitor. However, it is clear that it is a very strong emotion, beyond mere prejudice or stereotyping. It seems likely that the word “hostility” was used to avoid repeating the word “hatred”; but that the intention was for this to represent a similar sort of emotion.”³⁶

Key sources of international law³⁷

UDHR (1948)

Article 19:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

ICCPR (1966; entry into force 1976)

Article 19:

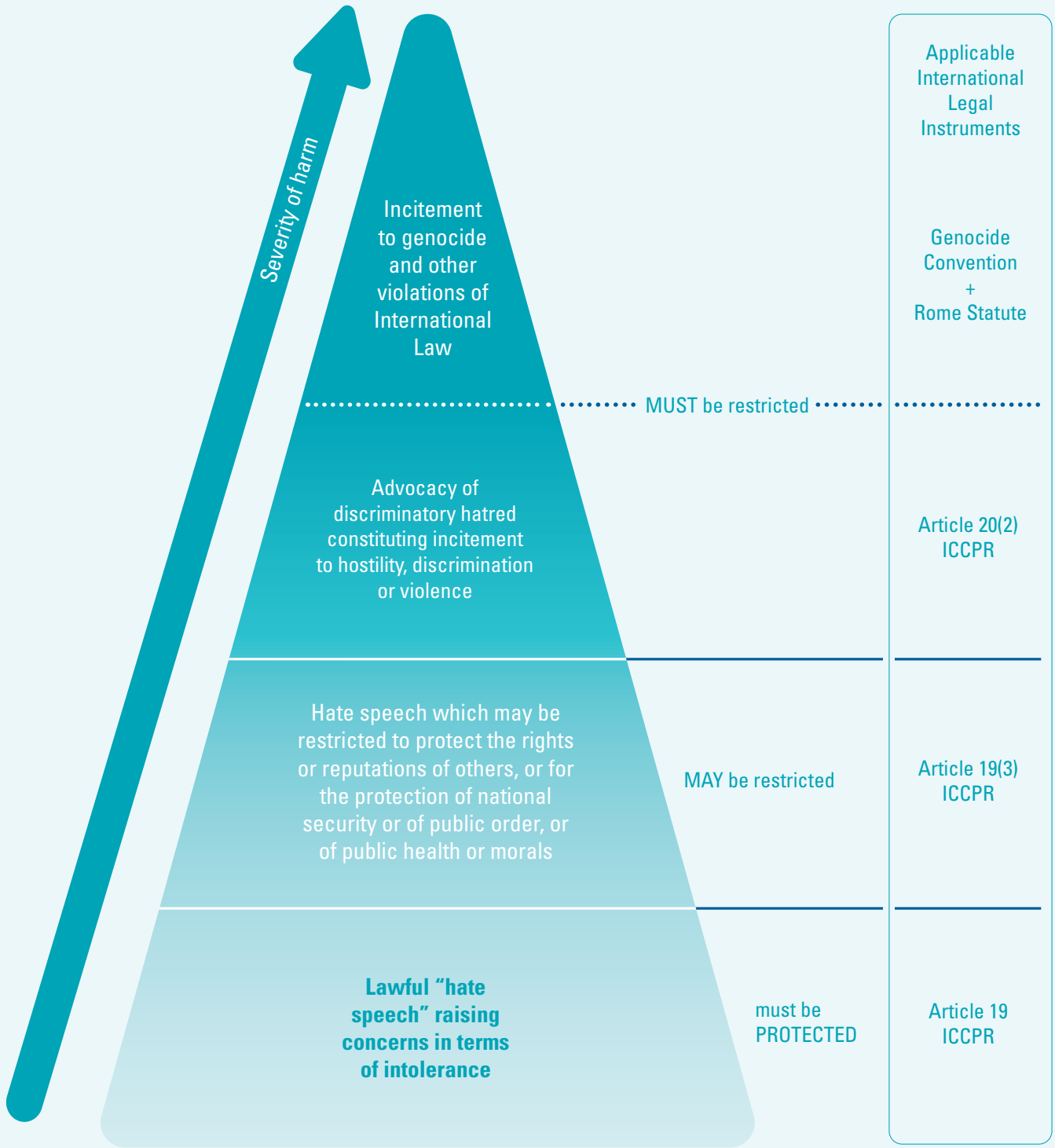
1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.
2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.
3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:
 - (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others;
 - (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.

Article 20:

1. Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law.
2. Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.

³⁶ IPU, 2018: 46.

³⁷ For further international and regional human rights instruments in which the right to freedom of opinion and expression is enshrined, see: [OHCHR, 2025e](#).



2.3. Soft law instruments

There are a number of soft law instruments providing guidance to States on how to interpret and apply Article 20(2) and especially how to navigate advocacy of hatred based on religion or belief. There are two levels when it comes to countering hate speech; one is the speech acts themselves, the other is the attitudes that underlie them.

UNHRC resolution 16/18 (2011), *Combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatization of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against, persons based on religion or belief*, contains action points for States on ways to foster peace and inclusion: building collaborative networks; developing mechanisms to identify tension; outreach training; discussing root causes of discrimination; speaking out; criminalizing incitement to violence; education to combat negative stereotyping; and open debate and interfaith dialogue.³⁸

The resolution calls on States particularly to take measures to ensure that public figures do not discriminate on the basis of religion or belief in the exercise of their duties; foster religious freedom, also in its external dimension; encourage the representation and participation of all people in society; make efforts to counter religious profiling. These are echoed in follow-up resolutions, including by the UN General Assembly.³⁹ The resolutions commit Member States to take measures to address the growing intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, whilst protecting freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of religion or belief.

The *Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence* (2012) (also known simply as the “Rabat Plan of Action”), emerged in parallel to UNHRC resolution 16/18 and on the back of UN Human Rights Committee *General comment No. 34 (Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression)* (2011) and joint position papers on incitement to hatred produced by UN Special Rapporteurs.⁴⁰ The Rabat Plan of Action is considered an important document for providing guidance on the correct interpretation of Article 20(2) of the ICCPR, identifying common misunderstandings and misapplications, and recommending measures to counter hatred based on religion or belief in the areas of legislation, jurisprudence, and policy.

The Rabat Plan of Action underlines the fact that “respect for freedom of expression has a crucial role to play in ensuring democracy and sustainable development, as well as in promoting international peace and security” (para. 8) and suggests, in line with Article 19 and 20, a high threshold for limiting freedom of expression, which must remain the exception. The Rabat Plan of Action highlights the problem of insufficient national legislation prohibiting incitement to hatred which, where it exists, can use variable terminology and is often inconsistent with Article 20 of the ICCPR. This provides potential to be unequally applied or too broadly cast, with minorities or dissenting voices becoming targets of persecution under vague domestic legislation against incitement.

Rabat Plan of Action: Recommendations for legislators

- Making a distinction between three types of expression: (1) one that constitutes a criminal offence; (2) one that would qualify for a civil suit; and (3) one that is not punishable but raises concerns with regard to tolerance and respect of others
- Inclusion of clear, robust definitions of key terms, such as “hatred”, “discrimination”, “violence” and “hostility”, referring to the Camden Principles⁴¹ for guidance
- The systematic application of the three-part test (legality, proportionality, necessity), implied in Article 19(3) ICCPR, for assessing the legitimacy of any restriction on freedom of expression
- Drawing on the guidance provided by international human rights expert mechanisms
- Ratification and implementation of relevant human rights instruments
- Repeal of anti-blasphemy laws, deemed counterproductive
- Adoption of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation.

The Rabat Plan of Action proposes a six-part threshold test to assess whether expressions of hatred or incitement to hatred are sufficiently severe to be considered a criminal offence. The threshold test includes consideration of the following: (1) social and political context; (2) status of the speaker; (3) intent to incite the audience against a target group; (4) content and form of the expression; (5) extent of the expression; and (6) likelihood of harm, including imminence.⁴²

³⁸ UNHRC, 2011.

³⁹ OHCHR, 2025b.

⁴⁰ OHCHR, 2025f.

⁴¹ The *Camden Principles on Freedom of Expression and Equality* were developed in 2009 by the ARTICLE 19 organization. They provide what they call a “progressive” interpretation of international law and standards around Article 19 of the UDHR. See: [ARTICLE 19, 2009](#).

⁴² OHCHR, 2013. See also: [UNGA, 2012](#).

A legislative response is insufficient by itself since it targets the perpetrator of hatred but does not address the root causes. To comprehensively address hatred based on religion or belief, the legislative response should be accompanied by a multi-stakeholder policy response: “States, media and society have a collective responsibility to ensure that acts of incitement to hatred are spoken out against and acted upon with the appropriate measures, in accordance with international human rights law.” (para. 35)

One of the recommendations of the Rabat Plan of Action encourages political parties to “adopt and enforce ethical guidelines in relation to the conduct of their representatives, particularly with respect to public speech.” (para. 57)

The Rabat Plan of Action also addresses the behaviour of public figures, specifically politicians and religious leaders:

“Political and religious leaders should refrain from using messages of intolerance or expressions which may incite violence, hostility or discrimination; but they also have a crucial role to play in speaking out firmly and promptly against intolerance, discriminatory stereotyping and instances of hate speech. It should be made clear that violence can never be tolerated as a response to incitement to hatred.” (para. 36)

The 2019 *United Nations Plan of Action to safeguard religious sites: In unity and solidarity for safe and peaceful worship* identifies the important role of parliaments in safeguarding religious sites, through their contributions to public debate and advocacy. The UN Plan of Action, in connection with violent extremism as and when conducive to terrorism being a threat to religious sites, clearly highlights the need for a comprehensive strategy to address this, including by national parliaments with the support of the IPU.⁴³

2.4. Guidance for parliamentarians

In *Hatred on the basis of religion or belief*, the 2024 report of Nazila Ghanea, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC),⁴⁴ many of the recommendations directly and indirectly relate to the parliamentary mandate. The report encourages parliamentary engagement with affected communities:

“Advocacy of hatred can be combated through measures for improved participation and social integration of religious or belief minorities. This can include active dialogue in legislative and parliamentary processes, as well as engagement in issues of concern at the local level, such as the creation of consultation and dialogue mechanisms, working groups or joint task forces with religious communities and civil society organizations. It is vital that such engagement not be tokenistic but rather foster the genuine participation and social integration of religious or belief minorities in all their diversity.” (para. 56)

It also includes recommendations to States on legislative measures to address religious hatred, including both general anti-discrimination laws and specific prohibitions on incitement:

“(e) Review all legislation and policies to ensure that state policies are free of hate speech; complaints mechanisms and procedures also need to be reviewed to ensure that there is no impunity for state actors who engage in hate speech;

(f) Adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation to prevent and respond to hatred based on religion or belief, irrespective of whether or not such hate speech rises to incitement in accordance with Article 20(2) of the Covenant;

...

(k) Adopt legislation prohibiting advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, in accordance with Article 20(2) of the Covenant; this should be informed by the breadth of thought, conscience, religion or belief, as understood in Article 18 of the Covenant, and incidents should be assessed carefully, on a case-by-case basis, with the benefit of the guidance of the Rabat Plan of Action.” (para. 62)

⁴³ [UNAOC, 2019](#).

⁴⁴ [OHCHR, 2024a](#).

The Special Rapporteur developed the following checklist for parliamentarians when evaluating or drafting “hate speech” legislation:

Checklist for parliamentarians: Evaluating (draft) “hate speech” legislation (2024)

The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief recommends that parliamentarians carefully consider the following questions, in reflecting international human rights standards, when drafting or scrutinizing legislation on “hate speech” or similar offences:

(1) Does the legislation distinguish between types of expression? The Rabat Plan of Action recommends that a clear distinction should be made between three types of expression:

- (a) expression that constitutes a criminal offence;
- (b) expression that is not criminally punishable, but may justify a civil suit or administrative sanctions;
- (c) expression that does not fall into either of the above categories, but still raises concern in terms of tolerance, civility and respect for the rights of others.⁴⁵

(2) Do any limitations on expression conform to the three-part test of legality, necessity, and proportionality? The ICCPR provides that freedom of expression may only be subject to such limitations as are provided by law and are necessary (a) for respect of the rights and reputations of others or (b) for the protection of national security or public order or of public health or morals. Manifestations of religion or belief may only be limited to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights of others. Any restriction must be the exception, not the rule, and must conform to the principle of proportionality.⁴⁶ Limitations based on protecting morals must be based on principles not deriving from a single tradition and must be understood in the light of universality of human rights and non-discrimination.⁴⁷

(3) Does the legislation provide robust definitions? Terms such as hatred, discrimination, violence, or hostility can be misused and therefore merit thorough consideration and clarity as to their scope.⁴⁸ Furthermore, offences such as “encouragement of”, “praising”, “glorifying”, or “justifying” terrorism or extremism must also be clearly defined so as to prevent their misuse.⁴⁹

(4) Is the legislation non-discriminatory? Laws against “hate speech” must not violate the right to equality and non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion or belief. They must not discriminate in favour of or against one or certain religions or belief systems, or their adherents over another, or religious believers over non-believers.⁵⁰ They must also not prejudice the rights of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.⁵¹

(5) Does the legislation punish causing offence to religious belief? It should not. Prohibitions of displays of a lack of respect for a religion or belief system are only permissible in the specific circumstances envisaged under Article 20(2) of the ICCPR. It is also not permissible for “hate speech” legislation to prevent or punish criticism of religious leaders or commentary on religious doctrine or tenets of faith,⁵² not least because this may violate freedom of religion or belief itself.

(6) Are any criminal punishments compatible with human rights? Punishments for advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to violence, hostility or discrimination must be compatible with human rights standards.⁵³

(7) Is the legislation robustly complemented by other initiatives? As affirmed in the Rabat Plan of Action, while a legal response to “hate speech” is important, legislation is only part of a larger toolbox to respond to the challenge it represents. Effectively addressing its root causes requires policy measures which promote intercultural understanding, including through education, the training of state functionaries, creating and strengthening human rights and equality bodies, and bolstering diversity in the media.⁵⁴ Speaking out against advocacy of hatred based on religion or belief is also a valuable and necessary companion to regulation of expressions.⁵⁵

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45 OHCHR, 2013, appendix, para. 20.

46 UN Human Rights Committee, 2011, para. 34.

47 UN Human Rights Committee, 1993, para. 8; UN Human Rights Committee, 2011, para. 32.

48 Principle 12 of the Camden Principles provides guidance in this regard. See: ARTICLE 19, 2009; OHCHR, 2013, appendix, para. 21.

49 UN Human Rights Committee, 2011, para. 46.

50 UN Human Rights Committee, 2011, para. 48.

51 UN Human Rights Committee, 1994, para. 1.

52 UN Human Rights Committee, 2011, para. 48.

53 UN Human Rights Committee, 2011, para. 26.

54 OHCHR, 2013, appendix, paras 42–49.

55 OHCHR, 2013, appendix, para. 36; OHCHR, 2019, annex I, paras 20–22; OHCHR, 2019, annex II, commitments VI and VII.



Panel discussion on “Religion and belief in different secular systems: Examples from around the world” on 14 June 2023 as part of the first Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue in Marrakesh, Morocco. © IPU

2.5. Anti-blasphemy laws and incitement to hatred

In some States, limiting freedom of expression on the grounds of hate speech targeting a religion or belief is manifested in anti-blasphemy laws. Over 90 States have anti-blasphemy laws, prohibiting expressions which are interpreted as insulting religions or religious figures, actors or symbols.⁵⁶ States with anti-blasphemy laws are found across all the geopolitical groups.

From the perspective of international law, anti-blasphemy laws violate human rights and fundamental freedoms since:

- It is the individual who is the rights holder, and not the religion or belief as such and its associated figures, symbols or spaces, nor religious feelings.
- Human rights do not protect religions or beliefs from insult, ridicule or criticism.
- Expressions that could be considered blasphemous by a religion or belief do not provide sufficient grounds to fulfil the three-part test of Article 19(3) or the incitement threshold of Article 20(2) of the ICCPR that would legitimize limiting an expression

- Anti-blasphemy laws are inherently discriminatory: they prioritize one religious or belief community over another. Often this is to the detriment of minority groups and can contribute to the deprivation of their fundamental freedoms, as well as potentially stoking social tensions.
- Anti-blasphemy laws can be a source of incitement to retribution against alleged blasphemers and as such threaten peaceful coexistence.

Anti-blasphemy (and anti-apostasy) laws have been identified by the HRC, the treaty body of the ICCPR, and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression as contravening the ICCPR, and they have called for their repeal.⁵⁷ A number of States have repealed their previous anti-blasphemy laws since 2015, including Iceland, Norway, Malta, Denmark, Canada, Greece, New Zealand, Ireland and Scotland.⁵⁸

2.6. National interpretation of international standards

Parliamentarians are tasked with translating international standards into national law. There is a spectrum of interpretation around what forms of expression relating to religion or belief cross the threshold into incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence. The different responses to the desecration of the Qur’an in northern European countries throughout 2023 provide insight into this spectrum.

⁵⁶ [Luke Wilson, 2023.](#)

⁵⁷ [UN Human Rights Committee, 2011](#), para. 49; [OHCHR, 2019](#), para. 55; [OHCHR, 2013](#).

⁵⁸ [Article 18 Alliance/IRFBA, 2022.](#)

Case study: Responses to the desecration of the Qur'an

Throughout 2023, a number of incidents of the desecration of the Qur'an in the Scandinavian countries of Sweden and Denmark caused widespread hurt amongst Muslim communities and led to retributive acts especially against Swedish individuals and interests. In 2023, the Swedish Embassy in Baghdad was stormed, there were calls for the boycott of Swedish products, and two Swedish citizens were killed in Brussels.

Sweden has wide-reaching laws protecting freedom of expression, as well as freedom of religion or belief. There is no law prohibiting the burning of a religious text, which is regarded as an act of free speech. All protests must be given permission by the police and are reviewed for their compliance with the law.

The international diplomatic community was divided on whether the deliberate and public burning of the Qur'an constituted incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence, as reflected by split voting over UNHRC resolution 53/1 and its assertion that such acts do amount to incitement.⁵⁹

The responses of affected States to the incidents of Qur'an burning varied:

In **Denmark**, between July and November 2023, it is recorded that more than 500 demonstrations were registered involving the burning of books or flags. The reactions to the desecration of the Qur'an caused concern in Denmark, especially around domestic security.

The Government put forward a draft bill to Parliament to amend the Criminal Code, introducing a ban on the improper treatment of scriptures of significant religious importance to a recognized religious community, which would also prohibit the burning of the Qur'an. The bill was subject to a public hearing process and underwent a number of adjustments. On 7 December 2023, Parliament passed legislation amending the Criminal Code Bill, inserting the following paragraph in Article 110e:

"Subsection 2. Anyone who, publicly or with the intention of distributing it to a wider circle, is guilty of improper treatment of a writing that has significant religious significance for a recognized religious

community, or an object that appears to be such a writing, shall be punished in the same way."⁶⁰

In **Sweden**, the Government condemned the incidents as Islamophobic and not reflective of the Government's position. The acts also enjoyed very limited support among Swedes in general. There was no amendment to the law, since free speech includes the right to criticize all religions. However, court cases have occurred and judgments handed down in relation to Qur'an burnings; for example, Linköping and Stockholm District Courts have found defendants guilty of incitement to hatred against a population group.⁶¹

MP Margareta Cederfelt deplores the protests but asserts that their nature was incorrectly reflected in the international media, being isolated incidents and not a reflection of Swedish sentiments towards Islam. She indicates that the first burning was politically motivated, while the subsequent and most visible incidents were caused by a non-Swedish person seeking asylum. A response to the protests was called for, but changing a longstanding law that upheld freedoms important to Sweden and Swedes was not considered to be the appropriate response to provocative behaviour.

Ms. Cederfelt says, *"Debates are an important part, and to continue to be engaged in society, because that's a tradition in our society, and we should also stand behind our laws. But with freedom comes respect. We shouldn't only talk about freedoms, we need also to talk about inclusiveness in society. We must make it easier for migrants and refugees to integrate into society and feel belonging."*

In **Norway**, in a similar way to Sweden, the Government condemned the burning of the Qur'an, while also stating that it would not change its laws on freedom of expression, which also permits criticism of religion. If such criticism ever constituted incitement to hatred, discrimination or contempt against Muslims, it could be prosecuted under existing hate speech laws. A demonstration planned in 2023 which was due to include a burning of the Qur'an was cancelled, with the police citing security concerns.



An Indonesian Muslim man looks at a giant Qur'an on display before offering prayers during the holy month of Ramadan at the Al Akbar mosque in Surabaya. © Juni Kriswanto/AFP

59 UNHRC, 2023. See also: UNGA, 2023; OHCHR, 2024b.
 60 Parliament of Denmark, 2023.
 61 OHCHR, 2024a, para. 57. See also: Stockholm District Court, 2025.

2.7. Parliamentary tools for preventing and countering hate speech

Codes of conduct

A number of MPs, as well as UN Special Rapporteurs, have pointed to divisive rhetoric on the basis of religion or belief as being a tool of politicians to garner success in the polls. MP Ryan Callus of Malta calls it “*populist discourse for short-term political gains*.”

The IPU offers guidance in its *Indicators for democratic parliaments*. Indicator 2.1 addresses parliamentary ethics, and one of its subpoints is concerned with a code of conduct. This indicator recommends that a code of conduct prohibit any form of harassment based on a person’s characteristics, identity or circumstances. These guidelines contribute towards creating a culture of respect in parliaments. Where ethical behaviour is observed, it can increase public trust.

It is recommended that training be provided on the standards defined by a code of conduct. Some parliaments already provide training on unconscious bias, which can apply to perceptions of religion or belief.

The Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA) network proposed a Global Parliamentary Code of Democratic Conduct in 2021.

Many parliamentary codes of conduct already contain non-discrimination provisions, including on the basis of religion or belief.

The Code of Ethics for members of the Parliament of Latvia (Latvijas Republikas Saeima) states: “A Member of Parliament observes the principles of human rights and does not appeal to race, gender, skin colour, nationality, language, religious beliefs, social origin or state of health to justify his/her argumentation.”⁶²

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) guide, *Standards for codes of conduct for members of parliament and the parliamentary workplace*, includes the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of personal attributes, including religious beliefs.⁶³

Speaking up and out

Beyond the directive function of codes of conduct, there is also a broader call for parliamentarians, in their function as public figures, to voluntarily speak out against injustices and hateful acts, and to refrain from inciteful rhetoric. This imperative to speak out is echoed in several frameworks around countering hatred based on religion or belief.⁶⁴ The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief addresses this in report A/HRC/55/47 to the Human Rights Council, *Hatred on the basis of religion or belief*:

Global Parliamentary Code of Democratic Conduct

1. Base our political discourse on facts and evidence.
2. Refrain from spreading misinformation and disinformation.
3. Refrain from using inflammatory or defamatory language [that is based on non-corroborated facts].
4. Refrain from using threats, hate speech or inciting any form of violence against any person or group of persons and any form of discrimination.
5. Condemn any individual or campaign promoting attacks on democratic institutions and principles, on human rights, and on any law-abiding person exercising their constitutionally protected human rights.
6. Condemn any acts of vandalism or incitement to violent public disorder committed or threatened by government officials, candidates, citizens, or any other person.
7. Support access to free and independent media, with the support of a regulatory framework that applies equally to all media – including social media – whenever these tools are used for the exercise of civil and political rights.
8. Refrain from using national security or states of emergency as open-ended justifications for the erosion of democratic principles and practices beyond the strict limits provided by the principles of proportionality and necessity in tackling a national or transnational emergency (e.g. natural disaster, armed conflict or similar situation).
9. Use our parliamentary prerogatives to strengthen democratic values and principles; promote universal human rights; combat racism, homophobia, misogyny and any other form of discrimination, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; and increase effective, transparent, and fair participation of the citizenry in democratic processes.

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Para. 39. “[...] Countering expressions of hatred should not be left to the targeted community alone. State officials, diplomats, public figures, including parliamentarians, along with religious authorities and civil society organizations, have a vital role to play in ensuring that advocates of hatred are met with a robust response, bolstering assurance among religious or belief minorities that their standing as free and equal citizens will be defended.”⁶⁵

Pakistani senator Farooq Hamid Naek says that parliamentarians have “*core responsibilities*” in promoting trust and mutual respect to counter hate speech, including to “*speak against intolerance, discriminatory stereotyping and instances of hate speech; [...] be clear that violence can never be tolerated as a response to incitement to hatred*.” In addition, Mr. Naek sees the potential for cooperation between parliaments and religious leaders, which “*can serve not only to act as a system of checks and balances but also allow for policymaking, legislation and oversight that can curb violence and incitement to violence*.” In Pakistan, Sunni Muslims are estimated to comprise 80–85% of the population, and Shia Muslims make up 15–20%. Hindus, Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, Bahá’ís, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Zikri Muslims and Kalash, an indigenous group, account for under 5% of the population.⁶⁶

⁶² [Parliament of Latvia, 2016](#).

⁶³ [CPA, 2024](#).

⁶⁴ [UNHRC, 2007; ARTICLE 19, 2009](#).

⁶⁵ [OHCHR, 2024a](#).

⁶⁶ [US DoS, 2024g](#).

The King of Malaysia, Sultan Ibrahim, asked the political leaders of the country to be mindful in their rhetoric of their responsibility to keep the country unified, and to be careful with their language around issues of race and religion. The King said, “I would like to advise all parties to focus on promoting unity among the people, not division. I want to see the people united in harmony.” The message was delivered ahead of the 2024 Eid al-Fitr celebration at the end of Ramadan, known in Malaysia as Hari Raya.⁶⁷ Malaysia is a religiously diverse country. The national census estimates the population as 63.5% Muslim, 18.7% Buddhist, 9.1% Christian, 6.1% Hindu, 1.8% non-affiliated and 0.9% animists, Confucianists, Taoists, Sikhs and Bahá’ís.⁶⁸

Case study: Manara Center for Coexistence and Dialogue

The United Arab Emirates has a model of pluralism and coexistence which has enjoyed success at home and can serve as an example of good practice for other societies. In alignment with the UAE values of mutual respect and inclusive citizenship, Federal National Council member Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi established the Manara Center for Coexistence and Dialogue in March 2023, as a global platform to translate this vision into practical, community-based action.⁶⁹



Dr. Al Nuaimi emphasizes: “We need to work on the ground with community leaders and especially religious leaders, to make sure that everyone in that community is accepted and respected and they have the same rights as others. Parliamentarians and politicians will not be able to adopt inclusive citizenship unless they engage the religious leaders.”

The Manara Center works directly with local actors, including religious figures, educators and youth, to foster environments of acceptance and shared belonging. Through initiatives which create safe spaces for interreligious dialogue, and the Manara Youth Coexistence Initiatives, which empower the next generation to become ambassadors of peace, the Manara Center embodies the belief that coexistence must be anchored in the lived experiences and values of the community. It believes that it is not enough to legislate tolerance; it must be cultivated on the ground.

On 10 October 2024, the European Parliament held a debate on the rise of religious intolerance in Europe, in response to concerns expressed by human rights bodies, civil society and religious and belief organizations. The debate was prefaced by a statement from the European Commission on the rise of religious intolerance in Europe since the attacks of Hamas on civilians inside Israel on 7 October 2023, intolerance which has particularly targeted Jews and Muslims.

In December 2024, the Board of the Muslim Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC) visited the seat of the European Parliament in Brussels and had a meeting with the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Antonella Sberna, focusing on joint initiatives for countering anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred.⁷⁰ Ms. Sberna is responsible for the implementation of Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), which forms the basis for an open, transparent and regular dialogue with churches, religious associations or communities, philosophical and non-confessional organizations.

Parliamentary reports, inquiries and guides

Hatred based on religion or belief often intersects with other narratives that target religious communities. In recent years, hatred towards Muslims and Jews, variously labelled anti-Muslim hatred, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism or Jew-hatred, has been on the increase. It can manifest as or be grounded in conspiracy theories, which threaten democracies by questioning commonly accepted truths upon which society is based, eroding trust in democratic institutions, and undermining social cohesion. Conspiracy theories often proliferate in times of uncertainty. They draw on fear, anxiety and anger to provide often simplistic explanations of complex events. They are rooted in the creation of an “Other” who is often a member of a minority or marginalized group. Anti-Semitism in particular is a theme that underlies several conspiracy theories, historically as well as in the present.

Conspiracy theories: A guide for members of parliament and candidates was launched in the UK Parliament in May 2024, in the lead-up to the UK general elections.⁷¹ The guide was commissioned by former leader of the House of Commons Penny Mordaunt, who launched it with former shadow leader (now leader) Lucy Powell. The guide was composed by experts from established civil society groups, a number of which had a religion or belief focus. The work was led by the Antisemitism Policy Trust (APT), and contributors also included the Community Security Trust and TellMAMA.⁷²

The guide indicates that politicians can be proponents of conspiracy theories: “When politicians spread conspiracy theories – knowingly or unwittingly – that have a wide appeal to the public, they can provide significant encouragement for their proliferation. This is because politicians have a position of power and influence.” The guide hopes to be a helpful educational tool as well as to “encourage people with a public platform to refrain from assisting the spread of false, harmful and divisive themes.”

67 [Malaysian National News Agency \(Bernama\), 2024.](#)

68 [US DoS, 2024e.](#)

69 [Manara Center, 2025.](#)

70 [MJLC, 2024.](#)

71 [Antisemitism Policy Trust \(APT\) and others, 2024.](#)

72 TellMAMA and the Community Security Trust are organizations providing a safe place for citizens to record incidents of hatred against Muslims and Jews, respectively.

Case study: Canadian Senate report on Islamophobia

In 2023, the Canadian Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights published a report titled “Combating hate: Islamophobia and its impact on Muslims in Canada.”⁷³ It was commissioned in response to the alarming rise of incidents of Islamophobia, such as manifested in the 2017 attack on the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City (Centre culturel islamique de Québec) and other hate crimes targeting Muslim communities throughout Canada, where Muslims comprise 4.9% of the population. Through written submissions, witness testimonies and public consultation meetings with experts and stakeholders, Canadian senators collected data for addressing the complex issue of Islamophobia.

The first part of the report is dedicated to the intersectional nature of Islamophobia with discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation. The report addresses the necessary legislative and policy framework for combating hate crimes against Muslim communities. It also examines the role of traditional and modern social media in spreading or preventing rhetoric on Islamophobia, as well as the rising opportunities and challenges for the educational system to confront Islamophobia. The last chapter considers systemic Islamophobia through the lens of national security, secularism, workplace discrimination and the federal correctional system. The report includes 13 recommendations to Canadian state authorities for addressing Islamophobia.⁷⁴

As follow-up to the report on Islamophobia, the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights has also prepared a report on anti-Semitism. According to Senator David Arnot, a member of the Standing Senate Committee, the purpose of this report is to “generate a companion report into the specific challenges facing Jewish Canadians today. It will build on existing data from Jewish organizations and help us evaluate the effectiveness of current policies.”

In December 2024, the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights (JUST) presented reports on both Islamophobia and anti-Semitism to the House.⁷⁵

Summary of recommendations

- Training and education on Islamophobia and unconscious bias
- Additional funding to address hate-motivated crimes
- Public consultations and legislative amendments in relation to hate-motivated crimes
- Review of broadcasting policy, in particular to reflect the needs of racialized communities
- Legislation to provide a mechanism for human rights complaints
- Review of national security framework to take into account systemic Islamophobia
- Update the National Inherent Risk Assessment using the lens of intersectional Islamophobia
- Legislation requiring the Canada Revenue Agency to collect and publish data on religious organizations and develop a strategy to reduce bias
- Review the mandate and functioning of the Review and Analysis Division of the Canada Revenue Agency
- Legislation to establish an independent civilian body to review decisions of the Canada Revenue Agency’s Charities Directorate
- Legislation to modernize the Employment Equity Act, including to ensure that intersectionality and Islamophobia are taken into account
- Further investment by Statistics Canada in the proactive collection and dissemination of disaggregated data to take intersectional Islamophobia into account.

Legislation

Legislation is one way of ensuring that protections are codified and giving formal recognition to identity-based crimes.

The genocide against the Yazidis perpetrated by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has been recognized by a number of parliaments, including the European Parliament (2016), the US House of Representatives (2016), the UK House of Commons (2016), the Canadian House of Commons (2016), the French National Assembly and the Senate (2016), the National Assembly of Armenia (2018), the Iraq Parliament (2021), the Belgian Parliament (2021), the Dutch House of Representatives (2021) and the German Bundestag (2023).⁷⁶

A number of parliaments include members of other religions or beliefs as victims of genocide by ISIL. Article 7, first paragraph, of the 2021 Yazidi [Female] Survivors’ Law of the Iraqi Council of Representatives states: “Crimes committed by Da’esh against the Yazidis and other components (Turkmen, Christians and Shabaks) shall be considered crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity.”⁷⁷

In May 2024, the US Congress passed the Antisemitism Awareness Act (HR 6090) which adopts the working definition of anti-Semitism employed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).⁷⁸

⁷³ [Senate of Canada, 2023](#).

⁷⁴ [House of Commons of Canada, 2024a](#), appendix A, contains the full text of the recommendations, which are summarized in the box.

⁷⁵ [House of Commons of Canada, 2024a](#) and [2024b](#).

⁷⁶ Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman who survived captivity by Islamic State, refers in her statement on German Government recognition of the Yazidi Genocide to the “growing list of more than 18 governments and international bodies that have officially recognized the Yazidi Genocide.” See: [Nadia Murad, 2023](#).

⁷⁷ [Iraq Law No. 8 of 2021. Yazidi \[Female\] Survivors Law \(English translation\)](#).

⁷⁸ There is no internationally agreed-upon definition of anti-Semitism. A total of 43 countries have adopted the IHRA working definition.

Education

The medium of radio has been used to promote religious literacy (knowledge about and understanding of different religions) in Portugal. In 2022, Khalid Abdool Sacoor Jamal of the Islamic Community of Lisbon launched a show entitled *Que mundo, meu Deus!* (a Portuguese saying which roughly translates as “Lord, what is the world coming to?”) on the popular TSF Rádio Notícias. The show was given a two-and-a-half-minute slot at 7:20 a.m. and 4:20 p.m. – both peak commuter times – from Monday to Friday, with a longer slot on Saturday to provide a resumé of the week. The episodes are also available as a podcast.

The show has enjoyed popularity since its launch, averaging 300,000 listeners per day. The programme brings together three influential personalities, Jewish, Christian and Muslim respectively, to present precepts about their religion, shared values and views on issues on which religions take positions, such as euthanasia, abortion and current global conflicts, in simple terms for a younger audience. The presenters are lay members of their religious communities, not religious clerics.

Such was the show’s popularity that in June 2023 the then President of the Assembly of the Republic of Portugal, Augusto Santos Silva, invited its three hosts to Parliament to record a special, longer session on freedom of religion or belief and interfaith dialogue. This was to mark the National Day of Religious Freedom and Interreligious Dialogue, established by Parliament in 2019 in commemoration of the date of publication of Religious Freedom Law 16/2001 in 2001.⁷⁹ In 2023, Mr. Santos Silva also visited the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), an international interfaith organization with headquarters in Lisbon.

Dialogue

In 2019, KAICIID established the European Policy Dialogue Forum, a Europe-wide platform conducting policy talks at the European Parliament in Brussels with a view to enhancing social cohesion in Europe. The policy talks convene representatives from European institutions, especially the European Parliament, and religious organizations, as well as experts and advocacy groups.

In 2024, KAICIID organized a policy talk in partnership with the European Council of Religious Leaders/Religions for Peace Europe (ECRL/RFP Europe) and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) on “*Why words matter: An interreligious perspective to combat hate speech*”. Participants reflected on the priorities for the next EU Anti-Racism Action Plan (2025–2030), as well as the urgent need for interfaith engagement to tackle hate speech. Presentations were made by Antonella Sberna, European Parliament Vice-President responsible for implementing Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU; Katharina von Schnurbein, European Commission Coordinator on combating anti-Semitism and fostering Jewish life; and Alexandre Gussel, the Council of Europe Secretary General’s Special Representative on anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hatred and hate crimes.

Austrian MEP Lukas Mandl, who sponsored the event, stated: “*Our aim is to end the political abuse of religion, especially the abuse of religion for purposes of violence and conflict. And we want to foster interreligious dialogue.*”⁸⁰

Webinar series against hatred based on religion and belief (2024/2025)

A concrete recommendation of the Marrakesh Communiqué is to “advocate for public education and awareness-raising focused on promoting respect and understanding between individuals and communities across religions and beliefs, upholding the dignity of all.”

Responding to the growing concern around the rise in divisive rhetoric based on or grounded in religion or belief, and the threat this poses to democratic principles and human rights, the IPU and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in cooperation with the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB), developed a webinar series, *From theory to action: Parliamentarians against hatred based on religion or belief – Crafting pathways to more peaceful, inclusive and just societies*. Designed as a four-part series focusing on the promotion of human rights literacy, the webinars covered the following themes:

- (1) Understanding and upholding freedom of religion or belief;
- (2) Navigating freedom of expression, freedom of information, cancel culture and hate speech to uphold human rights and foster social cohesion;
- (3) Digital challenges to peace, inclusion and human rights: The role of social media platforms in the spread of hate speech and opportunities to counter these;
- (4) When less is more: Alternatives to legislation when countering hatred on the basis of religion or belief.

The webinars, which took place between November 2024 and May 2025, brought together international experts and parliamentarians to explore issues related to hatred based on religion or belief and to share good practices in countering it in order to give parliamentarians the knowledge, tools and confidence to take action when faced with religious hatred in their own contexts.

⁷⁹ TSF Rádio Notícias, *Que mundo, meu Deus!*, 2023.

⁸⁰ KAICIID, ECRL/RFP Europe, OSCE/ODIHR, 2024.

Recommendations for parliaments and parliamentarians

- Ensure that national legislation is fully in line with international human rights standards around freedom of expression
- Review and amend legislation that may enable or perpetuate religious hatred, repeal anti-blasphemy laws, adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation
- Strengthen inclusive public debate and parliamentary processes, engaging a wide range of stakeholders including representatives of religions, beliefs and faith-based organizations
- Include provisions on respectful behaviour and non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion or belief, in parliamentary codes of conduct, and exercise restraint and responsibility in personal and party rhetoric
- Facilitate the awareness-raising and capacity-building of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff on hatred based on religion or belief and its intersection with human rights
- Advocate for public education and awareness-raising focused on promoting respect and understanding between individuals and communities across religions and beliefs, upholding the dignity of all
- Publicly condemn all forms of hatred based on religion or belief
- Exercise parliamentary oversight over incidents of religious hatred and monitor and address such developments through complaint mechanisms and reporting systems
- Use traditional and social media platforms for the promotion of respect and understanding between individuals and communities across religions and beliefs
- Foster and participate in regional and global networks and dialogues to counter hatred on the basis of religion or belief and foster peaceful coexistence



Panel discussion on “Building bridges through interfaith dialogue for more peaceful and inclusive societies” during the 148th IPU Assembly. © IPU



Interview with Mr. Saber Chowdhury (Bangladesh)

Mr. Saber Chowdhury was a member of the Jatiya Sangsad, the Parliament of Bangladesh, from 2009 to 2024. He served as President of the IPU from 2014 to 2017. This interview was conducted in March 2022.

What role do religion and belief play in Bangladesh?

Bangladesh is a religiously diverse country. Although Islam is the dominant religion, we also have Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. The State adopts a secular approach to politics, not in the traditional sense of separating religion and the State, but according equal respect, acknowledgement and space to all religions. National events include a recitation not only from the Qur'an but also from the Bhagavad Gita and from a Buddhist text. Religious feasts or celebrations have both a religious part, where only members of that community participate, and a community part, open to people of all religions to attend. Inclusiveness in Bangladesh has been long established: we have instances where land has been given from a Hindu temple for a mosque to be built.

Do you think it is important for parliaments to engage with religion or belief in their work?

Absolutely. The basic concept is that parliament itself must be inclusive, in both its composition and work. The inclusivity process starts with the selection of candidates from the political parties. The product of that choice is reflected in the configuration of parliament. If you ensure that your political party is reflective of the diversity of society, then you will have a parliament which is reflective of different communities.

The laws that we enact, the policies that we articulate and shape, should also be a reflection of the composition of society. The easiest way to leave someone behind is not to acknowledge or recognize them. In that sense, it is helpful to have religion or belief as a lens through which parliamentary work is considered.

In parliament, there is consultation for anything that has an implication for any of the religions. We have many Hindus who moved from India right after partition, so we had to discuss their property rights. Hindus have their own rules on succession and how property rights are to be transferred, so there is separate legislation regulating this.

Did you engage in the religious diversity of your constituency?

Of course. When I did my work as an MP, I reached out to the different communities and listened to them. When we had an allocation from the Ministry for Religious Affairs for donating to mosques and orphanages, I made sure that the Hindu and Buddhist places of worship also had access to that fund. This is a way to build on that inclusive approach.

One of the largest Buddhist monasteries in Bangladesh is in my former constituency. When the head priest passed away a few years ago, his funeral was postponed for some time due to the coronavirus pandemic. When the cremation was due to take place, I was asked to light the funeral pyre as a representative of the community.



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Should parliamentarians be promoting tolerance amongst different communities?

I don't think the word tolerance goes far enough – we should be talking about “togetherness.” Tolerance is about putting up with something, whereas togetherness is about embracing, it is more inclusive. We have to focus on what brings us together, since what unites us is always greater than what divides us. When we are having an event, we try to identify what is common among the religions that will ultimately lead to common human values, such as peace being the ultimate objective of all religions.

What challenges do parliamentarians encounter around religion or belief in the digital space?

A general challenge that we are facing is how to take advantage of social media and yet be wary of its shortfalls, such as words being taken out of context. The world at the moment is incredibly polarized, plagued with stereotypes and approaches that want to compartmentalize and label people. Social media algorithms have led to the emergence of digital constituencies, or echo chambers of like-minded beliefs. With regard to religion, it is a very sensitive matter and there are people who will try and distort and diffuse it for their own agenda.

Media literacy – how we interpret news and differentiate fake news from what is true – is important. We are currently fighting the battle of fake news and the alternative reality that it creates. This is a challenge for democracy, which is based on certain assumptions, one of which is truth. If you start questioning what truth is, then the foundation of democracy becomes less stable.



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3. Protecting the rights of religious and belief minorities

“We are all in the majority and in the minority somewhere and sometime in the world and in history.”

Dr. Leo Igwe, Humanist Association of Nigeria and Board Member, Humanists International

“Underscoring the particular obligation of parliaments and their members to defend and promote the rights of persons belonging to ethnic, cultural and religious minorities, thereby creating a society in which every individual enjoys all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, in particular freedom of worship and the right to freely practise a religion, under democratic principles and conditions [...]”

Ensuring respect for and peaceful co-existence between all religious communities and beliefs in a globalized world, Resolution adopted by the 116th IPU Assembly (Nusa Dua, Bali, 2007).⁸¹

3.1 Overview

International human rights law is based on the principle that all people, regardless of their religion, belief, or any other characteristics, are equal in rights and dignity, and thus are entitled to the equal protection of the law. This is laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted

by the UN General Assembly in 1948.⁸² Throughout human history, however, religious and belief minorities have frequently been subject to marginalization and discrimination, and this continues in many States.

⁸¹ IPU, 2007.

⁸² UNGA, 1948, Articles 1, 2 and 7.

There is no internationally agreed definition as to what constitutes a minority. The mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues encompasses the following definition: “An ethnic, religious or linguistic minority is any group of persons which constitutes less than half of the population in the entire territory of a State whose members share common characteristics of culture, religion or language, or a combination of any of these. A person can freely belong to an ethnic, religious or linguistic minority without any requirement of citizenship, residence, official recognition or any other status.”⁸³

Although the term minority is used in the 1992 *Declaration on the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities* (UN General Assembly resolution 47/135), it is not the preferred language for all communities, as some believe it can communicate inferiority. In the context of Iraq, for instance, which has many religions and ethnicities, the term “component” is preferred and is also used in the Constitution.⁸⁴

Religious minority status often intersects with diminished access to power, though this is not always the case, with a number of States historically and presently being led by governments of a religious minority.

The rhetoric around religious minorities sometimes gives too little attention or protection to those who identify as religiously “non-affiliated”; although this group accounted for around 16% of the global population in 2010, the third largest group behind Christians and Muslims (and expected to decline).⁸⁵ This includes atheists and agnostics, as well as those with beliefs that they do not wish to associate with an existing institutionalized belief system. Freedom of religion or belief, as defined in Article 18 of the UDHR and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), includes, as a non-derogable right, the right “not to believe,” as well as the right to “change one’s religion or belief.” International human rights law equally protects theistic, non-theistic, atheistic and any other beliefs.⁸⁶

Parliaments are one of the most important national institutions for the upholding of the rights of religious or belief minorities, as per the obligation of States under international law. They can do this through:

- Ensuring that robust anti-discrimination legislation exists
- Ensuring that legislation around the free exercise of religion or belief is comprehensive, including the right to choose, exercise and change one’s religion or belief, in line with international standards
- Being inclusive in their parliamentary processes to ensure that legislation and policy are developed in consultation with society in its diversity, including religious and belief minorities

- Exercising oversight over government policy impacting religions and beliefs
- Ensuring that their own speech refrains from inciting to violence, hostility or discrimination towards religious or belief minorities.

Part 1 of the present report provides an overview of parliaments with positive measures to encourage the greater representation of religious and belief minorities in parliament and policymaking. Where parliament is inclusive, it contributes to trust in political leadership, and also to more comprehensive legislation, robust political systems and peaceful societies.

3.2 International standards

Protecting the rights of religious and belief minorities is covered in a number of human rights instruments, generally under the prohibition on discrimination, and under the right to freely choose, change and express one’s religion or belief.

Some instruments include articles specifically dedicated to minority rights.

ICCPR, Article 27

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (ratified by 196 States Parties), Article 30

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

There is also a dedicated *Declaration on the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities* (1992), a soft law instrument, which highlights the principles of non-discrimination, participation and the protection and promotion of identity.⁸⁷

83 [OHCHR, 2025a](#). See also: [UN, \[no date\]a](#).

84 [Iraq 2005 Constitution](#).

85 [Pew Research Center, 2012](#).

86 [UN Human Rights Committee, 1993](#), para. 2; [OHCHR, 2018](#), para. 10.

87 [UNGA, 1992](#), annex.

Excerpt from the 9 Articles in the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Articles 1–5):

Article 1

1. States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.
2. States shall adopt appropriate legislative and other measures to achieve those ends.

Article 2

1. Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (hereinafter referred to as persons belonging to minorities) have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.
2. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life.
3. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in decisions on the national and, where appropriate, regional level concerning the minority to which they belong or the regions in which they live, in a manner not incompatible with national legislation.
4. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to establish and maintain their own associations.
5. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to establish and maintain, without any discrimination, free and peaceful contacts with other members of their group and with persons belonging to other minorities, as well as contacts across frontiers with citizens of other States to whom they are related by national or ethnic, religious or linguistic ties.

Article 3

1. Persons belonging to minorities may exercise their rights, including those set forth in the present Declaration, individually as well as in community with other members of their group, without any discrimination.
2. No disadvantage shall result for any person belonging to a minority as the consequence of the exercise or non-exercise of the rights set forth in the present Declaration.

Article 4

1. States shall take measures where required to ensure that persons belonging to minorities may exercise fully and effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law.
2. States shall take measures to create favourable conditions to enable persons belonging to minorities to express their characteristics and to develop their culture, language, religion, traditions and customs, except where specific practices are in violation of national law and contrary to international standards.
3. States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.
4. States should, where appropriate, take measures in the field of education, in order to encourage knowledge of the history, traditions, language and culture of the minorities existing within their territory. Persons belonging to minorities should have adequate opportunities to gain knowledge of the society as a whole.
5. States should consider appropriate measures so that persons belonging to minorities may participate fully in the economic progress and development in their country.

Article 5

1. National policies and programmes shall be planned and implemented with due regard for the legitimate interests of persons belonging to minorities.
2. Programmes of cooperation and assistance among States should be planned and implemented with due regard for the legitimate interests of persons belonging to minorities.

Article 4(2) highlights the fact that the enabling role of the State is in line with the evolving self-understanding of minorities and their members, who should be free to determine whether and how they wish to cherish their various characteristics and traditions.⁸⁸ The caveat concerning international standards was included to cover traditions and customs that violate human rights law, such as female genital mutilation, and the Working Group on Minorities stressed that these practices should be outlawed not only for minorities but also for majorities as a universal principle applicable to everyone.⁸⁹

The United Nations has a Special Rapporteur on minority issues and a Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, both of whom speak out for religious or belief minorities, who often experience identity-based exclusion or discrimination.

⁸⁸ Heiner Bielefeldt and Michael Wiener, 2022: 5.

⁸⁹ UNCHR, 2005, para. 57.

In 2022, the OHCHR and the Equal Rights Trust (ERT) produced the guide, *Protecting minority rights: A practical guide to developing comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation*, which has a dedicated chapter on religious or belief minorities

and discrimination.⁹⁰ The guide aims to be a resource on how to translate international obligations around non-discrimination and equality into international law.

UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Nazila Ghanea addressed the Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue in 2023, giving examples of marginalization at different stages in life:

"[...] For holders of marginalized religions or beliefs, threats can arise almost anywhere, and the oppression begins for many at birth. Indeed, for many it starts with a lack of access to maternal healthcare for women marginalized on the basis of their religion or belief. On that same basis, their newborn child may be denied recognition of their religious or belief identity on their documents, or even denied citizenship and all the rights that come with it. Discrimination of this kind follows rights-holders through the education system, where they may be denied education outright due to their identity, or coerced into conversion by individual teachers, school authorities, or the education system broadly. It follows them into the workplace, where they may be forced into demeaning work or unhealthy conditions due to their caste, or non-adherence to a dominant tradition.

*They may be subjected to harassment, bullying, or violence from employers or colleagues due to their gender or perceived sexual orientation; they may be arbitrarily forbidden from carrying symbols or dressing in accordance with their beliefs. For many, religion or belief communities, and collective activities such as worship or teaching can provide vital sustenance in the face of oppression: however, these activities too are often inhibited. Local authorities or relevant ministries often deny marginalized groups permission to establish places of worship; indigenous communities often find the territory with which they maintain a spiritual bond going back millennia subjected to land-grabbing efforts by States or private enterprises. What is worse, places of worship are often subjected to direct attacks, mob violence and desecration [...]."*⁹¹



Some of the participants at the public hearing held at the National Congress in Brasília, Brazil. © Bahá'í World News Service

90 [OHCHR and ERT, 2022](#).

91 [Nazila Ghanea, 2023](#). (Written speech was slightly amended on delivery – see [YouTube video](#) of conference proceedings).

3.3 Parliamentary engagement for upholding minority rights

National parliaments, national parliamentarians

National parliaments have different ways of giving recognition to religious and belief minorities. Some have reserved seating for certain minorities to ensure representation in parliament, others have designated caucuses or cross-party groups (see Part 1 of the present report).

In Sierra Leone, there is an informal practice of ensuring that the political leadership also reflects the religious diversity of society: when the president is a Muslim, the vice-president will be a Christian, or vice-versa. This same tradition is also reflected in the Parliament, where the Speaker and Deputy Speaker will be Christian or Muslim, respectively. This is a voluntary practice not mandated by any law. The Parliament has a mosque, and a church is currently under construction, to which the Parliament's Christian fellowship has made a donation. In Sierra Leone, 77% of the population is Muslim (majority Sunni, up to 10% Ahmadiyya) and 22% is Christian, while others practise a traditional religion.⁹²

In several States, parliamentary groups can be formed by sitting parliamentarians. An All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for British Sikhs, who constitute less than 1% of the UK population, was established in 2020 "to support and promote the interests of Sikhs in the UK, work with British Sikhs to celebrate Sikh culture in the UK, and ensure full equality for all British Sikhs."⁹³ In the United Kingdom, United Sikhs – a member of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) (see chapter 1) – has been engaging with the APPG to advocate for the rights of Sikhs, particularly by advancing guidance on Sikh articles of religion, such as the turban, in schools and workplaces.

Sometimes parliamentarians, who themselves belong to a religious minority, use their representative function to give visibility to the situation of minorities. Salma Ataullahjan is a Canadian senator of Pakistani origin, and a practising Muslim (Islam constituting around 3.7% of the population in Canada).⁹⁴ Ms. Ataullahjan speaks to other senators about Muslim observances such as the fasting month of Ramadan and other holidays, as a way of promoting peer-to-peer learning and supporting religious literacy. She encourages her colleagues to ask her difficult questions: "*I think that helps in fostering understanding between people and ultimately realizing that we are all the same.*"

At speaking engagements in schools, universities and religious spaces, and with different groups, she is open about her religious identity. The senator recalls a comment of a young girl of Somali heritage following one of her engagements, who said to her: "*Senator Ataullahjan, today when I saw you, I realized that there is a place for me here in Canada.*" By being open about her religious identity in her parliamentary function, Ms. Ataullahjan highlights the congruence between the two while empowering religious minorities by helping them feel seen in the political landscape.

The National Congress of Brazil has hosted several public hearings organized by Brazil's Bahá'í Office of External Affairs and government officials, aimed at exploring issues around social justice and cultural transformation. Estimates of the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) put the number of Bahá'ís in Brazil in 2020 at some 45,000, about 0.02% of the population.⁹⁵

In February 2023, a joint public hearing took place in the National Congress on *The role of religion in promoting a shared identity among the diverse populations of the country through recognition of humanity's spiritual nature*. The hearing addressed the conflicts and identity politics being witnessed which were threatening unity, and reinforced the importance of overcoming prejudice through highlighting shared human dignity, which could be found in spiritual principles. It was attended by parliamentarians, government officials, academics and faith-based civil society organizations.⁹⁶

Another public hearing was held in the National Congress in June 2023, focusing on the persecution and human rights violations against the Bahá'ís in Iran.⁹⁷ In December 2023, the Chamber of Deputies commemorated the centenary of the Bahá'í community in Brazil, with Mr. Arthur César Pereira de Lira, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies at the time, acknowledging that "*the Bahá'í community has made significant contributions to Brazilian society.*"⁹⁸ In 2024, the Bahá'í Universal House of Justice announced a new national House of Worship to be built in Brasília, Brazil.

Romania, which has 20 recognized ethnic minorities, is also a country with many religious minorities.

Census data from 2021 indicates that 73.6% of the Romanian population belongs to the Romanian Orthodox Church and 3.9% is Roman Catholic. Other religious minorities include Greek Catholics, Old Rite Russian Christians, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahá'ís, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Buddhists and non-believers. There is frequently a correlation between ethnic minority and religious affiliation.⁹⁹

⁹² [US DoS, 2024j](#).

⁹³ [UK Parallel Parliament, \[no date\]](#).

⁹⁴ [US DoS, 2024b](#).

⁹⁵ [ARDA, 2020](#).

⁹⁶ [BWNS, 2023c](#).

⁹⁷ [BWNS, 2023c](#); [BWNS, 2023b](#).

⁹⁸ [BWNS, 2023a](#).

⁹⁹ [US DoS, 2024i](#).

In 2023, the Romanian Parliament voted in new legislation on school education. The drafting of this legislation involved an extensive consultation process. Representatives of national religions participated in committee meetings where this legislation was being discussed – both the dedicated committee as well as the Education Committee – and jointly submitted a position paper on the reform.

Former Senator Silvia-Monica Dinică said: “*They all sat at the same table and came with one document presenting their position. They were present there the entire time and giving their opinion and we had a real dialogue with them. Here, the Parliament created an inclusive space for engagement and the religious communities exercised their civil rights by participating.*”

Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)

The IPU membership has made several statements with regard to the upholding of the rights of religious and belief minorities. In 1999, a resolution, *The contribution of parliaments to the peaceful coexistence of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities, including migrant populations, within one State, marked by tolerance and the full respect for their human rights*, was adopted during the 102nd Inter-Parliamentary Conference in Berlin. The resolution included sections with guidance on:

A. Democratic values and mechanisms

- Embed the rights of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities in constitutions, ratify international agreements and align national laws with international standards
- Ensure oversight to monitor compliance with the rights of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities
- Promote inclusion, tolerance and human rights education
- Enforce laws against racism and discrimination
- Ensure access to relevant information for both human rights bodies and affected communities

B. Cultures, languages and religions of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities

- Respect individuals’ right to self-identify with an ethnic, cultural or religious community
- Protect the freedom of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities to practice their own culture, customs and religion, enjoy their own education and speak their own language
- Support language education for ethnic minorities and raise awareness about minorities
- Guarantee equal access to training and qualifications

C. The media and their portrayal of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities

- Encourage objective and balanced media portrayals of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities
- Prohibit racist and discriminatory content in media

D. Participation in working life and receipt of social benefits

- Prevent discrimination in employment based on being a member of an ethnic, cultural or religious minority
- Ensure equal access to social and publicly funded benefits

E. Participation in democratic and social life

- Guarantee voting rights and fair political participation for citizens belonging to ethnic, cultural or religious minorities
- Uphold equal access to justice, property and public services
- Ensure non-discriminatory conduct by law enforcement towards ethnic, cultural or religious minorities
- Inform members of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities of their rights and how to claim them.¹⁰⁰

In 2007, during the 116th IPU Assembly (Nusa Dua, Bali), the IPU membership adopted a resolution, *Ensuring respect for and peaceful co-existence between all religious communities and beliefs in a globalized world*. The resolution emphasizes the principles of tolerance and non-discrimination. A number of key commitments explicitly address the role of parliaments in defending and promoting the rights of religious and belief minorities:

2. *Acknowledges* that mutual respect and cooperation among ethnic, cultural and religious communities are expressed, for the most part, not in special laws but, more effectively, in the framework of a constitution guaranteeing democracy, respect for human rights, individual freedoms, including religious freedom, and the peaceful co-existence of ethnic and religious groups and minorities; [...]
9. *Urges* parliaments to ensure that international and regional agreements to preserve the identity of ethnic, cultural and religious minorities are ratified or signed by any States which have not yet done so, and to supervise their effective implementation [...].

A 2008–2010 project, *Promoting inclusive parliaments: The representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament*, jointly led by the IPU and the UNDP, sought to understand how to promote the effective representation of minorities – including religious and belief minorities – in parliament. The subsequent report, *The representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament: A global overview*, examined mechanisms used by parliaments to promote minority representation – such as special electoral provisions – as well as to highlight challenges for minority representation.¹⁰¹

The IPU remains engaged in defending minority rights. The 2023 Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue: *Working together for our common future*, made a point of inviting and giving a prominent place to religious and belief minorities in its proceedings. Dr. Leo Igwe, founder of the Humanist Association of Nigeria and board member of Humanists International, emphasized to parliamentarians gathered at the conference that equality, reciprocity and equal access to rights, which many religious and belief minorities do not enjoy fully or freely, are an important precondition for dialogue.

¹⁰⁰ For the full text of the resolution, see: [IPU, 1999](#).

¹⁰¹ [Oleh Protsyk, 2010](#).

Dr. Leo Igwe, founder of the Humanist Association of Nigeria and board member of Humanists International

“Dialogue is an exercise of equals, not an exchange between a master and a slave, between a lord and a subject. So, an inclusive dialogue cannot be realized when those who belong to other religions and beliefs are treated as second-class citizens, are denied leadership positions, given longer prison sentences, denied lawyers, or punished just for being outside the accepted religions. Unfortunately, legislations that exclude people on religious and belief grounds have been used to undermine peace and inclusion of religious or non-religious persons. Laws that criminalize blasphemy and apostasy exist in different countries and have been deployed against minorities, including real, imagined, supposed atheists, humanists and other non-believers, denying them their right to freedom of religion or belief.”



© Dr. Leo Igwe

During the 148th IPU Assembly (Geneva, 2024), in cooperation with OHCHR and the Equal Rights Trust, the IPU organized a panel discussion, *Protecting minority rights: Towards comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation*. The aims of the panel discussion were to raise parliamentary awareness of the need for, and the requisite contents of, comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, in line with the *Practical guide*,¹⁰² to share good practices on the parliamentary process for the adoption of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, to discuss common challenges and problems in legislating in this area, and to identify potential solutions, including the role of the IPU.¹⁰³

Global Minority Parliamentarians Caucus (GMPC)

The Global Minority Parliamentarians Caucus (GMPC) began life as the European Minority Parliamentarians Caucus (EMPC). It was founded in 2022 and officially launched as an NGO in May 2023, during the conference of the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent in Geneva, Switzerland, by Yvonne Apiyo Brändle-Amolo, a Swiss-Kenyan member of the Swiss Social Democratic Party. The EMPC evolved into the GMPC in 2024, after registering members from Africa, Latin America, North America and Canada. It constitutes a network of current and former members of national and regional parliaments and municipal councils who belong to or represent minority groups. Its mission is to “promote equal opportunity and empowerment for minorities in public policy at all levels of our organization and society.”

The network aims to empower its members through fostering leadership development, contributing to public education around minority issues, engaging in advocacy on behalf of minorities, and influencing policy. It further aims to support members in influencing legislation to strengthen the rights of minorities in their contexts.

The network promotes multi-stakeholder engagement, including with indigenous, religious and traditional leaders. The GMPC acknowledges that, in some contexts, religious spaces constitute the only safe platform accessible to religious minorities where they can be heard. This is particularly true in contexts where trust in state governance institutions is low. It observes that tendentially the Global South is more interested in remaining connected with traditional wisdoms and institutional religion. Thus, religious and traditional leaders are important allies for the GMPC, to help gain the trust of constituents, and understand their concerns and needs in order to advocate for them more effectively.

According to Ms. Brändle-Amolo, who is the president and CEO of the network, the GMPC often takes on an advisory role in fostering interfaith dialogue between members of parliament and marginalized or under-represented groups within the community. It shares recommendations from the youth and indigenous leaders with parliamentarians regarding inclusive policies and legislation on issues related to religion and society, and initiates community outreach projects that address social issues, such as poverty and discrimination, from a multi-faith perspective.

The GMPC endeavours to collaborate on initiatives that support the overall well-being and development of the community, and engages with religion and belief in many of its activities, including:

- HUB: *Geloof in den Haag* (faith in The Hague), a network of international and migrant churches in The Hague, supporting each other and vulnerable communities.¹⁰⁴
- In Switzerland, the GMPC collaborated with members of parliament and civil society organizations to organize a conference on female genital mutilation (FGM), which led to the Federal Office of Public Health issuing a statement opposing FGM in June 2024.¹⁰⁵
- The GMPC has been collaborating with different religious groups on ways to address youth radicalization and hate crimes or violence perpetrated by youth from marginalized communities. Ms. Brändle-Amolo delivered a sermon at the parish of St. Georg in Sursee, Switzerland, in February 2023 in her capacity as a political and community leader where she emphasized the importance of bridge-building between different authority figures like pastors and politicians, while respecting the societal roles that both religious and political institutions play in the community.

The GMPC believes in a holistic approach that involves legislative and policy changes, religious interventions and also grassroots efforts to build trust, understanding and a sense of belonging within the community. By working together, parliaments and different religions can create a safe, inclusive and thriving environment for all members of the community.

¹⁰² OHCHR and ERT, 2022.

¹⁰³ IPU, 2024b; OHCHR and ERT, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ HUB, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), 2024.

Rabbi Alex Goldberg, Rabbi of Guildford (UK) and Dean of Religious Life and Belief at the University of Surrey

On dialogue and action to protect Jews and Muslims in the United Kingdom

In recent years, an increase in anti-Semitism and Islamophobia has been observed in the United Kingdom. Data from 2022 indicates that 65% of racially or religiously aggravated hate crimes in the UK were targeting people perceived as being either Muslim or Jewish.¹⁰⁶ The events on and following 7 October 2023 led to an upsurge in anti-Semitism in the UK and around the world. In parallel, there has been an increase in Islamophobia, culminating in the anti-migrant riots in the summer of 2024, which were triggered by misinformation and had a clear anti-Muslim dimension.

“I believe that there are three physical threats towards the Jewish community in the UK. The first is anti-Semitism on the hard left. The second is the far right and populist movements, and the third is from violent Islamist extremist groups that have anti-Semitic ideologies. A key task of parliaments and MPs is to reassure communities about their safety. I run chaplaincy services for 2,000 Muslims and 2,000 Hindus. Many are concerned about the rise of far-right movements, racism and faith-based hatred. The fact that this has become commonplace runs counter to our liberal democratic values.

I observe some minorities becoming increasingly inward-looking in light of the threats to their safety. Many are asking themselves: “How do we protect our communities?” That can create an insularism as walls go up in communities under attack. If you map that onto certain political trends, such as the growth of populism and nationalism, nativism and exceptionalism in the West, then you will see it serves the development of siloed societies. Religious leaders respond to this with fear, saying: “Look at what is going on around you, it is Islamophobic. Come back into the mosque.” Or: “It is anti-Semitic. Come back into the synagogue.” For me, we need to remember the ideal to “seek the peace and welfare of the city”: a religious value common to many of our faiths.

Something needs to be done urgently to counter the hatred towards minorities, to combat the ignorance that drives stereotyping, and to promote reconciliation between communities. I see the responsibility here with religious leaders as much as with politicians and make three suggestions:



© Rabbi Alex Goldberg

Firstly, clergy needs to become more politically literate, and parliamentarians more religiously literate. This must combine an understanding of how faith, rights and equality come together. That is the kind of language I want to see in parliament in the future, one that focuses on democracy, the rule of law, non-discrimination and all other rights, but with an understanding of the compatibility of religious values with these, and with religious actors as allies.

Secondly, I borrow from my mentor, Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who advocated for putting religion in the public space and at the service of the State. I support the idea that clergy should engage in the public space as active participants in civil society and have a dialogue of engagement with parliamentarians. I think that we can enrich each other for the better. If you make political decisions without taking into account faith-based wisdom or communitarian viewpoints – which are especially vital in democracies – you may undermine your original intentions. The world of faith and belief, parliament and business can break silos and co-create better policies and better thinking on many of today’s most pressing issues.

Finally, the hate speech that is spreading on social media needs to be dealt with. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and Ashoka [a non-profit organization] produced a 2019 report for Google.org which showed that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia were already the fastest growing forms of hatred online across Europe, and now it manifests itself increasingly on the streets. Policymakers and lawmakers – and here I am looking at MPs – have the responsibility to address this.”

Recommendations for parliaments and parliamentarians

- Uphold international and regional standards on the protection of religious and belief minorities
- Adopt anti-discrimination laws and policies that guarantee the rights of religious and belief minorities, including the protection of their identity and full inclusion in public life
- Engage with leaders and communities of religious and belief minorities to better understand their lived experiences, needs, and concerns
- Encourage the engagement of religious and belief minorities in parliamentary procedures and deliberations
- Establish or participate in existing parliamentary committees, cross-party caucuses or other networks focusing on the rights of religious or belief minorities
- Monitor the situation of religious or belief minorities in the national context through independent bodies, reporting systems and parliamentary tools
- Facilitate the awareness-raising and capacity-building of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff on minority rights, and religious literacy around minority religions or beliefs
- Refrain from inflammatory speech against religious or belief minorities and advocate for inclusion and mutual respect
- Support policy that creates enabling social, political, and economic conditions for minorities to freely express, develop, and practise their religion or belief
- Advocate for inclusive education policies that celebrate religious and cultural diversity



Yvonne Apiyo Brändle-Amolo, President and CEO of the Global Minority Parliamentarians Caucus (GMPC), delivered a sermon at the parish of St. Georg in Sursee, Switzerland, in February 2023. © Werner Mathis



Interview with Ms. Cynthia López-Castro (Mexico)

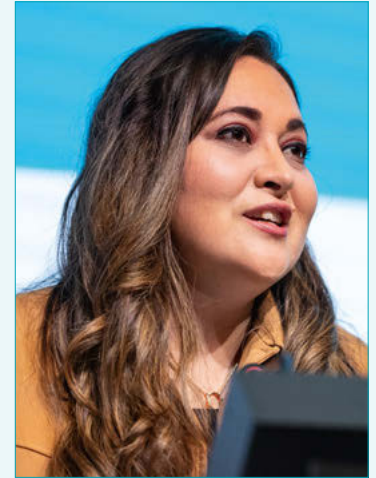
Ms. Cynthia López-Castro has been a member of the Mexican Parliament since 2018, initially as a member of the Chamber of Deputies and since 2024 as a member of the Senate. In 2017, at the age of 30, she participated in the drafting of a new Constitution for Mexico City. She was also one of the main proponents of the inclusion of a youth quota in the city's electoral law. She has been a member of the IPU Board of Young Parliamentarians and in 2023 she was the woman recipient of the inaugural Cremer-Passy Prize, awarded to MPs working for a more peaceful, inclusive and sustainable world. In March 2023, she became the President of the Bureau of Women Parliamentarians.

What role do religion or belief play in Mexico?

Mexico is a very Catholic country. Mexicans are fervent believers in the Virgin of Guadalupe. Every Mexican says "I am guadalupano" – that is, from the Virgin of Guadalupe. On December 12, which is the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico is paralysed. It is a very festive day. Mexico is also a diverse country. Our last census from 2020 indicates that around 78% of the population is Catholic, 10% is Protestant, and 8% doesn't practise any religion at all. There are also groups of Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Muslims. We also have belief that is expressed as combining elements of indigenous beliefs and Catholicism.

Do you think it is important or valuable for parliaments to engage with issues of religion and belief in their work?

Yes, because we are not familiar with that topic. We live in a religious society, and religious freedom is upheld by the Constitution, and yet Mexico is constitutionally secular and has been so since President Benito Juárez in the 1850s. Mexico is very secular on paper but in reality it is full of symbolism, and parliamentarians should be aware of this. The President of Mexico, for instance, belongs to a party called Morena, which means "brown skin". This has a lot of symbolism because the name Virgin of Guadalupe is like the Virgin Morena. There is a very strong connection between Morena, the party, and Morena "dark skin", and the name of the Virgin of Guadalupe.



© IPU

I have mixed feelings about dialogue. As representatives, MPs should certainly listen to religious leaders because they are citizens and have needs and rights. However, in Mexico religious leaders are influential and can use that to interfere in politics, such as by endorsing candidates during a Sunday sermon, harassing politicians or interfering in policy debates, for instance around reproductive rights. Their approach often is tied to corruption and does not respect the division of powers.

Do you see any specific opportunities for dialogue?

Yes, in reaching rural communities better. In major cities, governance institutions are stronger than in rural areas, however a church or a house of prayer is closer, and religious leaders have more authority with citizens than politicians. If they are actors and informal members of the decision-making process, we should be in touch with them. Here could be an opportunity for dialogue to better reach and serve our citizens. But for it to work we need religious leaders to respect the rule of law and their own jurisdiction. We also need to promote civic education, so citizens understand the division of power and authority.



The inaugural event “Keeping Hatred off Our Streets” organized by the Women’s Faith Forum was hosted by the MP for Battersea Marsha de Cordova and featured Yvette Cooper, Shadow Home Secretary, as one of the main speakers, at the UK Parliament on 28 February 2024. © Women’s Faith Forum

4. Promoting gender equality and women’s rights

“I have seen hate speech directed at women on social media which concerns me, since social media reflects widely-held views within society, and in turn also forms the beliefs that run through our collective imagination. This derogatory and hostile discourse against women has been perpetuated for centuries and has led to an idea taking root in the collective unconscious that women are inferior and unable to take up certain roles, such as being religious leaders. I want to draw parliamentarians’ attention to this problem. In line with their mandate to ensure the rule of law and equal treatment of all citizens, I ask them to defend our right to hold different opinions and to interpret religious texts differently.”

Kahina Bahloul, the first woman imam in France, founder of the Fatma Mosque in Paris

4.1 Overview

Parliamentarians have a key role to play in the promotion of gender equality and women’s rights, especially through their legislative responsibility and representative and oversight functions.

Religions and beliefs influence the world view, values and even normative standards around gender roles and the rights of women in many communities. Religious leaders can be important community leaders when it comes to changing attitudes towards harmful practices, providing community education, advocacy and support to victims of gender-based violence and discrimination.¹⁰⁷

They can also advocate for equal rights and opportunities. Harmful practices and gender-based discrimination have also been justified on the basis of religious precepts, and can impact areas such as:

- Education of girls and women
- Family and personal status laws
- Rights of girls
- Clothing
- Employment
- Freedom from harm
- Reproductive rights
- Access to healthcare
- Freedom of religion or belief
- Participation in public life
- Economic empowerment and autonomy.

107 [Safe Havens, \[no date\]; Muslim Women’s Network UK, 2025.](#)

The role of religion and belief, and religious actors, in issues around gender equality, is therefore also diverse. Scholar Marie Juul Petersen of the Danish Institute for Human Rights, says: *“Religious actors are not only victims or perpetrators of human rights violations; they are also often staunch advocates and supporters of human rights, finding motivation and justification in religion for their struggles towards greater inclusion, equality and justice. Such actors are key partners in efforts to address gender and religiously based discrimination.”*¹⁰⁸

Thus, when parliamentarians engage with the promotion of gender equality and women’s rights, they can encounter religious actors as allies to achieve common goals or engage with policy issues with a religious or belief dimension, just as they can also encounter resistance.

This is a complex, multi-faceted issue, warranting a longer study. The following chapter will provide some examples

that illustrate a number of the issues of relevance to parliamentarians. In doing so, it will consider the positive role that parliamentarians and religious actors can play in promoting gender equality and upholding women’s rights whilst also respecting FoRB and other cultural values.¹⁰⁹

4.2 International standards

The three pillars of the International Bill of Human Rights—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)—affirm that all people are equally entitled to all human rights and freedoms, and to equal protection under the law, without distinction.

The ICCPR and the ICESCR oblige States to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of both men and women outlined as follows:¹¹⁰

ICCPR	ICESCR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom from discrimination • Right to equality between men and women • Right to life • Freedom from torture • Freedom from slavery • Right to liberty and security of person • Right to be treated with humanity in detention • Freedom of movement • Freedom of non-citizens from arbitrary expulsion • Right to fair trial • Right to recognition before the law • Right to privacy • Freedom of religion and belief • Freedom of expression • Right of peaceful assembly • Freedom of association • Right to marry and found a family • Right of children to birth registration and a nationality • Right to participate in public affairs • Right to equality before the law • Minority rights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom from discrimination • Right to equality between men and women • Right to work • Freedom to choose and accept work • Right to just and favourable conditions at work • Right to form trade unions • Right to strike • Right to social security • Right of mothers to special protection before and after birth • Freedom of children from social and economic exploitation • Right to an adequate standard of living • Freedom from hunger • Right to health • Right to education • Freedom of parents to choose schooling for their children • Right to take part in cultural life • Right to enjoy benefits of science • Right of authors to moral and material interests from works • Freedom to undertake scientific research and creative activity

¹⁰⁸ [Marie Juul Petersen, 2019.](#)

¹⁰⁹ For other relevant work on the intersection of religion and belief, gender equality and human rights, see: [OHCHR, 2018](#); [United Nations Population Fund \(UNFPA\) and Church of Sweden, 2016](#); [Azza Karam, 2019](#); [Open Global Rights, 2025.](#)

¹¹⁰ [OHCHR, 2025d](#); [UN, 2024.](#)

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979. This comprehensive treaty is specifically designed to address gender-based discrimination and is informally referred to as the “International Bill of Rights for Women.” It is one of the most widely ratified Conventions, with 189 States Parties as of March 2025. A total of 115 countries have ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention.

The Convention covers three dimensions of the situation of women, namely women’s legal status, civil rights, and the influence of culture and tradition on women. It affirms the principle of equality, reinforces women’s rights through the prism of human rights, and lays out an agenda for action to ensure the respect of these rights. Core principles include the legal prohibition of discrimination, the obligation to modify social and cultural patterns that perpetuate gender-based stereotypes, and the promotion of substantive equality. These principles are operationalized through specific guarantees related to legal protection, political participation, education, employment, healthcare, and ending all harmful practices in these areas.

Specifically, the Convention acknowledges the influence of culture and tradition – in the form of stereotypes, customs or norms – on women’s rights and their restrictions, and invites States “to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women” (Article 5). The application of the Convention is monitored by the CEDAW Committee, a body of independent experts which provides guidance on the implementation and interpretation of its provisions through general recommendations.¹¹¹

The Convention does not use the term religion. It does not directly address the problem of religiously justified discrimination against women. Nonetheless, Articles 2(f) and 5(a) make it clear that States Parties have a responsibility to end cultural practices leading to inequality between men and women, by all appropriate means and without delay.

General recommendation No. 28 on the core obligations of States parties under article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women provides guidance for interpreting Article 2 of the Convention, stressing that “a delay cannot be justified on any grounds, including political, social, cultural, religious, economic, resource or other considerations or constraints within the State.”¹¹²

In *general recommendation No. 33 on women’s access to justice*, the CEDAW Committee observes “a number of obstacles and restrictions that impede women from realizing their right to access to justice on a basis of equality” and

recommends that States Parties “protect women and girls from interpretations of religious texts and traditional norms that create barriers to their access to justice and result in discrimination against them.”¹¹³

In *general recommendation No. 40 (2024) on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems*, the Committee notes that “some misinterpretations of religion and culture can shape gender stereotypes” and it recommends that States Parties “engage religious leaders and faith-based actors in the process of addressing areas of possible tensions between some interpretations of religious traditions and human rights, such as through the “Faith for Rights” framework of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.”¹¹⁴

The 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights” include the “pledge to ensure justice and equal worth of everyone as well as to affirm the right of all women, girls and boys not to be subjected to any form of discrimination and violence, including harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, child and/or forced marriages and crimes committed in the name of so-called honour.”¹¹⁵

Case study: CEDAW knowledge hub and “Faith for Rights”

In 2023, the OHCHR and the National Human Rights Council of Morocco organized a pilot regional workshop in Rabat on promoting the knowledge hub related to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The event brought together parliamentarians, representatives of national human rights institutions, human rights activists, religious actors, women’s rights experts, academics and the media from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The goal of the workshop was to assess the use of the “Faith for Rights” framework [see chapter 5 below] by the CEDAW Committee in various dialogues with States and in its concluding observations.¹¹⁶

The workshop offered a platform for peer-to-peer learning and for strengthening networks and cooperation. Sessions focused on the confluence of religion with women’s and girls’ rights in the region and their relation to international standards. The stakeholders reflected on the complexity of issues around women’s and girls’ rights, which have been variously shaped by culture, tradition and religious interpretations, and how these factors can, at times, stand as a barrier to the full enjoyment of equal rights. They assessed different options to counter this, such as ways for parliamentarians (men and women) to participate in the CEDAW knowledge hub, strengthening women’s and girls’ rights in legislation, and reversing reservations about the CEDAW Convention prevalent in the region.

The former chief of the OHCHR Human Rights Treaties Branch, Ibrahim Salama, hailed this event as a “*pioneering experience*”. A change of paradigm could only take place through multi-stakeholder dialogue, including religious leaders and civil society, in bridging the gap between religions and human rights; top-down legislation alone was insufficient.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ The CEDAW Committee is composed of 23 experts nominated by their governments and elected by the States Parties.

¹¹² [UN CEDAW, 2010](#), para. 29.

¹¹³ [UN CEDAW, 2015](#), paras 3 and 25.

¹¹⁴ [UN CEDAW, 2024](#), paras 30–31.

¹¹⁵ [OHCHR, 2019](#), annex II, commitment V.

¹¹⁶ [OHCHR, 2022](#); [IPU and OHCHR, 2023](#).

¹¹⁷ [Morocco World News, 2023](#).

Also in 2023, the IPU in collaboration with the OHCHR launched the revised edition of *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol: Handbook for Parliamentarians*. According to this handbook, parliamentarians have an institutional and substantial role to play in view of the advancement of the Convention. It also recognizes the capacity of parliamentarians to be engaged with civil society actors and act as drivers for public opinion regarding the respect of the Convention.¹¹⁸

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted in 1989. It is the Convention that has been ratified by the most States in the world (196), including all UN Member States, with the exception of the United States of America. It is a key instrument in the protection of the status of girls from harmful cultural and religious practices.

4.3 Parliamentary engagement

There are many ways in which parliaments and MPs can and do engage with religion and belief for the promotion of gender equality and the upholding of women's rights.

Multilateral efforts for advancing gender equality and women's rights

The IPU has a dedicated programme for the promotion of gender equality which follows three goals:

- Increase the number of women in parliament (currently at 27.2%¹¹⁹) through well-designed quotas and parliamentary caucuses
- Support women in parliament
- Transform parliaments into gender-sensitive institutions that deliver on women's rights.

The IPU membership has also made clear statements relating to the violation of women's rights, also in the name of religion or belief, and the role and responsibility of parliamentarians in this regard. The Geneva Declaration on achieving gender equality and ending violence against women – adopted at the 131st IPU Assembly in 2014 – includes the following:

“Girls constitute another vulnerable group and face additional forms of violence, including female genital mutilation and other harmful practices, forced and early marriage, and murder in the name of so-called “honour”. [...] In light of the alarming reports of current violations of women's rights in conflict situations, we must condemn such acts publicly and denounce the use of religion and culture to justify them.”

There is a need for more women in parliament so that debates are more inclusive and better reflect reality. Women parliamentarians in particular, alongside their male counterparts, can play an impactful role in advocating for women's rights, as also acknowledged in the 2014 Geneva Declaration:

“Women's voices must also be heard. Women in leadership positions have the power to take specific action in response to the interests of and challenges faced by other women whose voices are not being heard or taken into account. However, women are still poorly represented in leadership positions [...]”

In the Kigali Declaration, adopted at the 145th IPU Assembly in 2022, parliaments committed to achieving parity in political decision-making, including by using electoral gender quotas and ensuring that other electoral quotas always have a gender parity provision.

The importance of empowering women parliamentarians is therefore an intrinsic part of addressing challenges to gender equality and women's rights, including those that intersect with religion or belief.

In 2024, the CEDAW Committee adopted *general recommendation No. 40 on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems*. The Committee recommends that States Parties:

- Adopt parity laws for all elections and appointments;
- Adopt rules to ensure parity in leadership positions in parliaments, local and regional councils and other community decision-making bodies;
- Accommodate the family obligations of parliamentarians, government officials, local and regional council representatives and the staff of those office holders, including care-friendly working hours, childcare within the vicinity of the workplace, as well as proxy and remote voting possibilities;
- Commission gender audits of parliaments, government offices and local and regional councils assessing gender-responsiveness and parity in division of responsibilities, and accordingly mandate and tailor reforms to reach parity across all areas and levels of decision-making;
- Adopt legislation on paid parental leave for parliamentarians, government officials, local and regional council representatives and the staff of those office holders;
- Provide training on preventing and addressing implicit bias and stereotypes for parliamentarians, government officials, regional and local council representatives and the staff of those office holders;
- Establish gender equality mechanisms within decision-making bodies and provide training on gender analysis and integration for lawmakers and staff to ensure the formulation of gender-responsive legislation, public policies and budgeting.¹²⁰

118 OHCHR, 2023a.

119 IPU, 2025b.

120 UN CEDAW, 2024, para. 47.

Empowering women of faith

Women of faith can be important interlocutors for parliamentarians around shared issues.

The Women's Faith Forum (WFF)¹²¹ was established in 2020 by six high-profile women of faith from five of the major faiths in the UK: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and Hinduism. Its mandate is to ensure that the voices of women of all ages and beliefs are heard by policymakers because their experience and grassroots knowledge will offer a unique insight into how to respond to issues that affect women.

The guiding principle behind the WFF is the conviction that there is much in common that women of faith share and their diversity is a source of learning about the vital roles that women play both in their own faith communities and, on their behalf, in wider society.

The WFF has held two events in the UK Parliament. In February 2024, House of Commons member Marsha de Cordova hosted the network for *The role of women of faith in addressing the problems of gendered antisemitism and Islamophobia and how women of other faith communities can be allies*. In October 2024, House of Commons member Sarah Sackman hosted *Women of faith rise up – how do we address hate speech and misogyny?*, in the context of National Hate Crime Awareness Week. The event was attended by over 50 women of faith from civil society organizations and 6 parliamentarians.

Kirith Entwistle, the first Sikh Member for her constituency, spoke during this event, encouraging women to step into public roles and embrace their religious identity.

In March 2025, two co-founders of the WFF, Jagbir Jhutti-Johal OBE and Laura Marks CBE, organized a conference at the University of Birmingham, *Women leading the way: Dialogue for reconciliation, peace and community cohesion*. It brought together 170 women of different religions and beliefs to highlight the transformative power of faith-based women's leadership. Echoing the theme of International Women's Month, *Accelerate action for gender equality*, the conference was framed as a call to action, among other things to dismantle the systemic barriers limiting women's equal participation in decision-making roles. The conference was attended by Lord Wajid Khan, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Faith, Communities and Resettlement.¹²²

Religious dress

Religious dress is an area in which parliamentarians engage, in both a legislative and a representative capacity.

A number of religions have dress codes for different genders. Many forms of religious expression include items of clothing, such as the hijab, burka, niqab and others for Muslim women, the kippa and tallit for Jewish men, a turban for Sikh men, a habit for nuns, robes worn by Buddhist monks, and others. While the right to hold a religion or belief of one's choosing is absolute, religious dress belongs to its external manifestation, and "may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others." (Article 18(3), ICCPR).



Lord Wajid Khan, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Faith, Communities and Resettlement, with participants of the conference *Women leading the way: Dialogue for reconciliation, peace and community cohesion* that was held at the University of Birmingham on 24 March 2025. © Victoria Beddoes/University of Birmingham

121 [WFF, \[no date\]](#). The website includes articles about the three activities mentioned below.

122 [University of Birmingham, 2025](#).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the physical manifestation of religion through clothing and symbols is a topic of ongoing debate around maintaining an appropriate balance between upholding freedom of religion or belief, maintaining the secular nature of the state and guaranteeing the impartial nature of public institutions, all of which are constitutionally guaranteed. In 2015, the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, which oversees the judiciary, issued a decision banning the wearing of religious symbols and clothing in judicial institutions by judges, prosecutors, and court officials, to protect the legal process from any bias, since Bosnia and Herzegovina is an ethno-religiously diverse country.

Bosnian MP Sabina Ćudić has spoken out about her party's critical position on banning the veil in public institutions, which it says discriminates against women:

“Religious leaders in my country were surprised that a progressive liberal party supported the right to wear the hijab in the courtroom in Bosnia and Herzegovina, because for us it's a women's rights issue, not just a religious freedom issue. It's also a women's rights issue not to be discriminated [against] in public institutions.”

A Bill declaring 1 February each year as National Hijab Day has passed both houses in the Philippines. The Philippines is a majority Christian country, with 79.5% estimated to be Roman Catholic and 9% as belonging to other churches. Muslims constitute 6–11% of the population and parts of the population also practise traditional religions.¹²³ The aim of the Act is to promote understanding and tolerance with regard to the religious expression of Muslim women through clothing and to celebrate religious diversity.¹²⁴

Other examples of state positions on the external manifestation of religion or belief through symbols and clothing can be found in Part 1 of the present report. Many of these impact women especially.

Combating female genital mutilation

An area that both the IPU and also individual parliaments and parliamentarians have been active in is advocacy for the prevention of female genital mutilation (FGM) (sometimes referred to as female genital mutilation/cutting – FGM/C).

FGM involves removing all or part of the female genital organs via incision for reasons that are not medically required. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers FGM to be a violation of women's rights. Its data indicates that it is practised in 30 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia and more than 230 million girls and women alive today have undergone FGM. It is also practised in diaspora communities around the world. It is very painful, has no medical benefit and can pose a serious health risk to the victim, through bleeding, infection or interference with urination. It can further contribute towards childbirth complications and newborn mortality.¹²⁵

FGM prevention has a legislative as well as a community dimension, since it involves both prohibiting this harmful practice and working to change attitudes around a tradition that is often viewed as a rite of passage for girls entering womanhood.

The IPU has engaged with members over several decades in efforts to combat FGM. While this is a regional and cultural practice, it has been justified in religious terms. Therefore, religious actors can be part of holistic efforts to put an end to FGM. IPU Secretary General Martin Chungong says in this regard:

“When we initiated our work on traditional harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, it quickly became clear to us that this was an issue more or less linked not only to tradition but also to several religions. That's why when we started the programmes with parliaments, we had to build strong bridges between parliamentarians and local religious authorities in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone.”

Parliamentary caucus on female genital mutilation in Sierra Leone

The West and Central Africa Region is home to 17 of the 27 African countries where FGM is prevalent, and more than 40 million girls and women have undergone FGM in the region. In Sierra Leone, the national FGM prevalence rate stands at 86.1%. Though it is practised by Christians and Muslims, the primary reason that FGM takes place is that it is part of an initiation ceremony into the Bondo society, a secret society for women which is influential in social, cultural and political life. The initiation ceremony is recognized as a rite of passage for girls into womanhood.

In 2020, a total of 34 members of the Parliament of Sierra Leone held a three-day workshop, supported by the IPU, entitled *Engaging members of parliament on female genital mutilation: An innovative approach to attaining SDG 5*. The workshop aimed to:

- Increase accurate knowledge among MPs of FGM and the risks of the practice from a human rights and health perspective
- Reinforce parliamentarians' skills on how to talk about FGM abandonment in their constituencies
- Galvanize political will from the Parliament to engage in community dialogue on FGM abandonment.

Following the workshop, the Sierra Leonean Parliament established a parliamentary caucus on female genital mutilation, to ensure continuity for further capacity-building and strengthen MPs' ability to give voice to FGM abandonment efforts. Parliamentarians in Sierra Leone are expected to safeguard all traditional institutions and ceremonies. The members of the caucus agreed that the Bondo society is valuable and can continue without FGM. The caucus has therefore focused its discussions on how the practice of FGM can be separated from the Bondo society through increasing knowledge based on human rights and health, as well as

123 [US DoS, 2024h](#).

124 [Senate of the Philippines, 2025](#).

125 [WHO, 2025](#).

through dialogue between parliamentarians and community leaders such as the traditional excisors (*soweis*), for whom FGM is a source of livelihood.

The IPU's work on FGM in Sierra Leone builds on earlier work in Djibouti, Mauritania and other regional and national parliamentary workshops on ending FGM and violence against women and girls in Africa.¹²⁶

2024 Bill to repeal the ban on FGM in the Gambia

FGM has been illegal in the Gambia since 2015, carrying penalties of up to three years in prison and fines. However, enforcement has remained weak, with just one conviction since the law's approval and as many as three out of four girls still at risk. In 2024, a Women's (Amendment) Bill was introduced to repeal the ban. If the Bill passed, the Gambia would become the first country in the world to reverse a ban on FGM.

As the vote approached, the IPU worked with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Women and Gambian NGOs to facilitate a study tour to Cairo, connecting Gambian MPs with international experts, religious leaders and parliamentarians. The study tour provided insights into Egyptian strategies against FGM, including legislative frameworks and community-based interventions. The study group also looked at the scientific background of FGM, its medicalization and ethical concerns, as well as the negative consequences. Discussions highlighted the vital role of political leadership in eliminating this dangerous practice.

In July 2024, after months of intense public debate and IPU lobbying, the Gambia's MPs voted against each clause, rejecting the Bill decisively. The Speaker of the National Assembly described the vote as an unprecedented rejection.

Language matters

The official term used by WHO is female genital mutilation (FGM). However, while this term is descriptive, it is not familiar to the communities who engage in the practice.

Former Kenyan MP Jacqueline Oduol, a linguist by training, says that language is an important tool of intercultural communication. When parliamentarians engage with communities, it is helpful to employ a context-sensitive communication style. With regard to FGM, Ms. Oduol suggests that it may be wise to also use the language of the communities, such as "cutting", to help bring them on board in the conversation: "*When you want to negotiate, you need to respect them and language is important.*"

Parliamentarians, as both community leaders and state legislators, thus have a unique opportunity to adapt their language to facilitate community engagement in addressing harmful practices.

Recommendations for parliaments and parliamentarians

- Ensure that national legislation aligns with international human rights standards to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination, including those justified on the basis of religion or belief
- Encourage the ratification of the CEDAW Convention and the Optional Protocol to CEDAW by parliament and address reservations to its provisions on the basis of religion or belief
- Identify and address, in a context-sensitive manner, religious or belief practices that discriminate on the basis of gender or violate women's rights
- Promote gender equality and gender-sensitive parliaments, including through the use of IPU guidelines and tools¹²⁷
- Empower women of faith as interlocutors for parliamentarians around shared issues
- Engage in networks of parliamentarians working on issues at the intersection of gender, religion, and belief, to exchange good practices and advance inclusive agenda
- Facilitate the awareness-raising and capacity-building of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff on gender equality and women's rights, and the intersection of these with religion or belief
- Develop reporting systems to monitor harmful gender-based practices carried out in the name of religion or belief
- Invest in public education and dialogue to improve gender literacy and gender equality, and support transformative cultural and social change

¹²⁶ [IPU, 2016a](#); [IPU, 2022](#).

¹²⁷ [IPU, 2025a](#).



Interview with Ms. Fiona Bruce (United Kingdom)

Fiona Bruce was a member of the House of Commons of the UK Parliament from 2010 to 2024. She was Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Freedom of Religion or Belief from 2022 to 2024. From 2020 to 2024 she served as the UK Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief and from 2022 to 2024 as Chair and then Vice-Chair of the Article 18 Alliance, a network of 38 countries committed to working together to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief internationally.

Why is dialogue between parliamentarians, religious communities and faith-based organizations important?

What religious communities and faith-based groups do in our local communities in the UK is, in my experience as a member of parliament in the north of England, amongst the most positive and constructive work. Much of it is done voluntarily, it promotes inclusivity and cohesion, and is directed towards the most vulnerable in our communities.

I've seen how faith-based groups have helped people to tackle drug addiction, how they have managed food banks, opened their doors for after-school clubs so that children whose parents are still at work can do their homework. I've seen how groups have provided debt advice to people who can't manage their money well and have helped them get their lives back on track. I've seen how job clubs have been set up and how street pastors support young people late at night. I've seen how prison visiting helps prisoners learn how to read or to stay in touch with their families whilst they're serving their sentences so that when they come out there's someone still there and waiting for them, to whom they matter.

Parliamentarians have a great platform in today's society and we can reach large numbers of people. We can — and should — speak about and promote the excellent work of faith groups in our communities. We can encourage them in their work by thanking them and encouraging others to follow their lead and ideas. We can also speak in parliament and we have the ear of ministers and can see how governments can support these organizations.

I've seen how some of this work has become nationalized. This was especially visible during the coronavirus pandemic, when local authorities found it impossible to reach and help the most vulnerable.

Faith groups stepped up with food parcels and medicine deliveries being dispatched to homes and even organizing the vaccinations of whole communities, many carried out in churches. This work helped break down barriers, even suspicions, which had previously existed on the part of officials who had been reluctant to work with faith groups.



© Fiona Bruce

Parliamentarians can play a critical role in bringing an awareness of the contribution of religious and belief communities into their own parliaments but this can only happen when they work with faith-based, indeed with grassroots organizations. I also encourage religious communities to invite parliamentarians to meet with them and see their work directly, so that this dialogue and cooperation may continue for the benefit of our communities and their cohesion.

In addition to being a member of parliament, you were also the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Can you tell me about this role and its link to parliament?

One of the major contributors towards the UK Government's attention to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) has been the work of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on FoRB, which produces reports and organizes debates in parliament. One of its reports labelled Article 18 of the UDHR as an "orphaned right" which had not yet been the subject of any dedicated UN Convention and is not given the same attention as other rights.

Over the years, the interest of our ministers and our Government in FoRB increased, leading to a 2018 government report, the Truro Review, which provided a set of recommendations for our Government to follow, to further the work on FoRB. One was the appointment of a Special Envoy, which was the role I was nominated to. Having a government representative allowed the UK to become a member of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA). The work began with the effort of parliamentarians.



Speaker of the House of Representatives of Australia Milton Dick is joined by youth volunteers and children during his visit to the BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu Temple in Canberra. © Office of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Australia

5. Building bridges between parliaments and society

“The results accruing from interfaith dialogue to secure the rule of law require from us effective and efficient collaboration between religious people and parliamentarians in order to confront the challenges – which are joint challenges – leading to efficient results and meeting the goals and expectations of the world at large.”

Ahmed Bin Salman Al-Musallam, Speaker of the National Assembly of Bahrain

“Parliamentarians are the interpreters of the heartbeat of their constituents. Religious leaders have the capacity to inspire their congregants to be their best selves and to achieve the nobility with which they have been endowed [...]. Religious and state actors alike should focus on realizing the capacity of individuals and communities to contribute to the advancement of society. And both legislators and religious leaders can approach capacity-building as a normative and moral endeavour, as much as an economic, technical, and political one.”

Bani Dugal, Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations

5.1 Overview

Parliaments, religions and beliefs share a common commitment to upholding the equal human dignity of all persons and creating cohesive societies where the needs and rights of all are met. There are numerous examples of collaborations between parliamentarians, religious

communities and civil society to achieve these goals. This chapter will showcase good bridge-building practices from around the world which contribute to fostering trust and creating resilient and inclusive societies.

5.2 Dialogue

The very act of genuine dialogue – characterized by reciprocity, equality and respect – between parliamentarians and representatives of religions and belief can be an important tool for building meaningful relationships and is employed in a number of parliamentary settings.

The European People’s Party (EPP) – currently the largest political group in the European Parliament – has had a Working Group on Intercultural and Religious Dialogue for 25 years with a goal of bringing together religious and political leaders in dialogue, promoting understanding and advocating for freedom of religion or belief worldwide.

The Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference (CPLO) has its Parliamentary Liaison Office in Cape Town, where the National Parliament of South Africa is located, as an institutionalized network for formal and informal dialogue with parliament.¹²⁸

The Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (IAO) is a political organization consisting of delegations from national parliaments of countries with a Christian Orthodox community. Its work is guided by the common values of the shared Orthodox faith of members and a desire to secure the institutional promotion and protection of Christian values. Its recent work has also focused on dialogue with other Christian and non-Christian communities.¹²⁹ In May 2024, it organized a conference with: the Conference of European Churches (CEC), a Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican ecumenical network; the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), a Catholic network; Together for Europe, a network of Christian movements and communities in Europe; the Holy Metropolis of Thessaloniki; and the School of Theology of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. In the same month, it signed a memorandum of understanding with the Muslim World League regarding cooperation.¹³⁰

As part of the 2000 Great Jubilee year of the Catholic Church, one event in Rome brought together government leaders, MPs and politicians from around the world. In his address, Pope John Paul II highlighted the particular features of their functions in theological language, including: exercising the primary duty of listening, as echoed by the *Shema Israel* (“Hear, O Israel!”) exhortation from the book of Deuteronomy in the Bible; making just laws in the service of human freedom; and performing moral and competent political service as an expression of neighbourly love. He also highlighted the role of dialogue, saying: “*Dialogue remains the irreplaceable instrument for every constructive confrontation, both within States and in international relations.*”¹³¹



Handing over of the Declaration for Common Easter of Christians to His Holiness the Pope of Rome Francis by the President of the IAO General Assembly, Mr. Ioan Vulpescu, and the Coordinator of Together for Europe, Mr. Gerhard Pross, on 19 September 2024. © IAO

Roman Pontiffs have engaged with parliamentarians on important policy issues. In 1998, an audience with Pope John Paul II took place as part of the Inter-Parliamentary Conference, *Attaining the World Food Summit’s objectives through a sustainable development strategy*, organized by the IPU with the support of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and hosted by the Italian Parliament. In 2021, Pope Francis met delegates attending the pre-COP26 Parliamentary Meeting and the Seventh G20 Parliamentary Speakers’ Summit (P20) in Rome.

5.3 Promotion of human rights

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) developed the first framework to address the connections between religions, beliefs and human rights to encourage joint action with different stakeholders – including parliamentarians and religious or belief communities – on the promotion and protection of human rights.

128 [CPLO, 2023](#).

129 See Part 1 of the present report for a profile of the IAO.

130 [IAO, 2024](#).

131 [John Paul II, 2000](#).

The “Faith for Rights” framework

“Many states still lack comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, which is a fundamental tool to protect people from violence and harassment based on their faith. In addition to punishing and deterring such acts, legislation enables people from all faiths and non-believers to participate more fully in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life – which, in itself, can reduce tensions and foster understanding.

I therefore urge faith leaders and political authorities to work for comprehensive anti-discrimination laws and institutions, and to use them where they exist. Religious leaders with great influence and large networks can familiarize their communities with the law – and with ways to invoke its protection.

Second, we need more whole-of-society initiatives to promote a culture of peace, based on human rights. This is the only way to address root causes and build communities in which expressions of hatred are socially unacceptable. Such initiatives will be strongly influenced by local cultures and historical factors. Common threads could include peer-learning, collaboration, and human rights education. They may also have a gender-based element, since expressions of religious hatred often disproportionately target women and girls.

My Office is deeply committed to working on combating intolerance, discrimination and violence against people based on religion or belief. Our multi-stakeholder process, “Faith for Rights”, engages governments, religious authorities and civil society, and includes a specific pledge by religious leaders to denounce any advocacy of hatred that incites violence, discrimination or hostility. “Faith for Rights” has been referenced by UN treaty bodies and Special Rapporteurs, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, among others. I urge you to contribute to its community of practice.”

Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

The “Faith for Rights” framework provides space for cross-disciplinary reflection and action on the deep and mutually enriching connections between religions, beliefs and human rights. The objective is to foster the development of peaceful societies, which uphold human dignity and equality for all and where diversity is not just tolerated but fully respected and celebrated. It stresses that all believers – theistic, non-theistic, atheistic or other believers – should work together to articulate ways in which “faith” can stand up for “rights” effectively and where both can enhance each other.

Concrete action-oriented “Faith for Rights” projects at the grassroots level aim to effect change on the ground through concerted interfaith action. The Beirut Declaration on “Faith for Rights” stresses that “only when we as religious actors assume our respective roles, articulate a shared vision of our responsibilities and transcend preaching to action, only then we will credibly

promote mutual acceptance and fraternity among people of different religions or beliefs and empower them to defeat negative impulses of hatred, viciousness, manipulation, greed, cruelty and related forms of inhumanity.”¹³²

The 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights” also contain the pledge not to give credence to exclusionary interpretations claiming religious grounds in a manner that would instrumentalize religions, beliefs or their followers to incite hatred and violence, for example for electoral purposes or political gains. Political and religious leaders have a particularly crucial role to play in speaking out clearly, firmly and immediately against disrespect and intolerance, not only of their own communities but also of any group subjected to attack. They should also make it clear that violence cannot be justified by prior provocation, whether real or perceived.

For example, leaders of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process condemned incitement to violence, discrimination or hostility in the name of religion, and they also advocated for people of all faiths to have unimpeded access to their places of worship. The Office of the Religious Track has translated the Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments into Greek and Turkish, making them available for women, men and children on both sides of the divided island. “As a carefully crafted practical document, “Faith for Rights” gives us, on the local level, the global umbrella to belong to, to share, learn and together try to ensure that all the commitments are used,” said the Religious Track executive director, Salpy Eskidjian Weiderud.¹³³

The #Faith4Rights toolkit translates the framework into practical peer-to-peer learning and capacity-building programmes, containing learning modules for each of the 18 commitments. They have received wide traction, being used or referenced by the United Nations and other bodies, faith-based actors and civil society organizations. They established a “Faith for Rights” community of practices in order to promote the universality and indivisibility of all human rights, without discrimination on any grounds.¹³⁴ The fifth annual meeting in November 2024 facilitated dialogue among more than 200 participants and exchange of information with faith-based organizations, parliamentarians and academic communities, in line with Action 55 of the UN Pact for the Future. Furthermore, the Council of Europe (CoE) commented that the “Faith for Rights” framework and toolkit with its peer-to-peer learning methodology was a useful tool for combating hate speech,¹³⁵ and the EU Gender Action Plan III called on the EU to support mobilization of religious actors for gender equality in line with the “Faith for Rights” framework.¹³⁶

Several online tools on “Faith for Rights” are available via open access:

[#Faith4Rights toolkit](#) (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights)

[“Faith for Rights” online programme](#) (International Center for Law and Religion Studies)

[“Faith for Rights” training package](#) (Faith for Rights Academy).

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¹³² OHCHR, 2018.

¹³³ OHCHR, 2025c.

¹³⁴ OHCHR, 2025g.

¹³⁵ CoE, 2022.

¹³⁶ European Commission, 2020.

5.4 Human security and common security

The IPU offers human security and common security as useful lenses for re-centring national, regional and global political decision-making around the human being. These notions are rooted in the fundamental functions of parliaments in legislation, oversight, budgeting and representation. The IPU seeks to streamline and sustain long-term peace efforts, based on the guiding principle that “one nation’s security cannot be achieved at the expense of another nation.”

The IPU’s work in the Sahel exemplifies the human security and common security approach. West Africa has been enduring an acute crisis in governance in recent years, with a series of coups d’état taking place since 2020. The IPU has been engaged in projects aimed at identifying ways to support the Sahelian and other West African States to restore robust governance systems grounded in democratic values.¹³⁷

A major source of destabilization has been through terrorism. The Global Terrorism Index of the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) names the Sahel region as the new global epicentre of Islamist terrorism. In 2023, almost half of all deaths worldwide due to terrorism took place in the Sahel, which also accounted for 26% of terrorist attacks.¹³⁸

Human security and common security

“Human security” extends the concept of security beyond the physical security of people and creates an enabling environment for human development by considering human security in eight dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, political and technological. Human security is based on citizen engagement, as citizens should be included in decisions that concern their security. It also implies contextualized and tailored legislation, since security threats vary depending on the situation and many have socioeconomic dimensions. A human security approach seeks to prevent conflict by addressing core problems before they escalate. To tackle problems at their roots, parliamentarians must bring together agendas on security, development and human rights and adopt a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach.

“Common security” is the regional or international application of the human security approach. It enshrines the idea that dialogue, multilateralism and collaboration are key elements to international attempts at addressing challenges. This is especially important where the challenges being faced are global in nature. Common security is grounded in the belief that there can be no development without peace, nor peace without development, and that neither is possible without respect for human rights. It calls for strengthened international cooperation and multilateralism through the establishment of trust between States and peoples and for a reinforced respect for international humanitarian law to protect civilians caught in conflicts.

In 2024, the IPU published a toolkit for parliamentarians, *Human security and common security to build peace*, which identifies interfaith and intercultural dialogue as important tools for mediating community conflict.¹³⁹

On the one hand, human security especially strengthens interfaith dialogue by addressing economic inequalities, protecting freedom of religion or belief, and fostering inclusive governance. It ensures that religious and belief communities can coexist peacefully by integrating religious leaders into policy discussions, promoting education on religious tolerance, and countering extremism through engagement with trusted community figures. Additionally, faith-based organizations contribute to social cohesion through humanitarian efforts and crisis response, reinforcing the role of interfaith collaboration in maintaining stability. On the other hand, common security extends this approach globally by promoting dialogue, multilateral cooperation, and legal protections for religious heritage. It highlights the importance of diplomatic engagement between religious and political leaders in conflict prevention and reconciliation. All in all, inclusion and dialogue are the key to peaceful societies.



¹³⁷ IPU, 2024a.

¹³⁸ IEP, 2024.

¹³⁹ IPU, 2024c.

The combination of gaps in security, the weak rule of law, the destabilization of neighbouring countries, the inadequate provision and quality of education, ailing economies, poverty, high youth unemployment, climate change and other deficits in development make communities vulnerable to radicalization and provide a security vacuum in which terrorist networks can proliferate.

In 2021, the IPU held the First Global Parliamentary Summit on Counter-Terrorism in Vienna, resulting in the declaration *The Call of the Sahel*, a commitment to investigate drivers of terrorism and avenues to strengthen governance institutions in the Sahel, to be carried out by a joint parliamentary bloc.¹⁴⁰ Participating parliamentary institutions identified religious and community leaders as important allies for parliamentarians seeking to strengthen state governance mechanisms and promote community cohesion.

Religion and belief play an important role in the Sahel and are expressed peacefully in the vast majority of cases. The newer religions of Islam and Christianity, which predominate, are often infused with traditional beliefs and practices. Where state institutions are weak, communities often look to their religious and traditional leaders for guidance.

Chad has a long history of coexistence between different faiths. The most recent census in 2009 stated that 58% of the population was Muslim (largely Sufi Tijaniyah), 34% Christian, and 4% other, including traditional religions.¹⁴¹ A member of the National Assembly of Chad, Jacques Laouhingamaye Dingaomaibé, shared about the country's experience:

“Chad has placed special emphasis on interreligious dialogue. It is necessary to raise awareness of the population about different lifestyles. We teach children and young people tolerance and respect for human rights. We have encouraged the creation and the organization of platforms within religious entities which involve religious leaders and messengers. The Government of Chad has also set out by decree a special day in November as a day of interreligious prayer. This prayer takes place in the presence of officials and it groups together all the faiths, the idea being to search for peace, the prevention of religious conflict and the promotion of interreligious dialogue. The idea is to promote not just peaceful coexistence and an inclusive society, but also to bring about a tolerant, inclusive world where each individual must respect all others.”

In 2023, the IPU, together with the National People's Assembly of Algeria organized a meeting in Algiers, *Engaging communities in the prevention of violent extremism and addressing the conditions conducive to terrorism*, which brought together parliamentarians, international parliamentary institutions, religious and tribal leaders of the communities of the Sahel countries, representatives of the UN and other international organizations, as well as youth and civil society NGOs.

The meeting provided insights into the contribution of religious and community leaders to countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism, including:

- By leveraging their influence to promote peace and counteract extremist ideologies
- As trusted and respected figures, using their platforms to denounce violence and advocate for tolerance and understanding
- By fostering open dialogue and providing education on the dangers of radicalization
- Together with their communities, identifying early signs of radicalization and undertaking a timely intervention
- Collaborating with law enforcement to enhance intelligence gathering and community policing efforts, creating a united front against terrorism.

Recommendations for parliamentarians, vis-à-vis religious leaders:¹⁴²

- To coordinate between the Ulemas and preachers to improve their joint capacity to combat extremist discourse and spread the values of peace and moderation;
- To establish a mechanism to build the capacity of the Ulemas in developing a unified counternarrative to terrorism;
- To reaffirm that terrorism should not be associated with any particular religion, nationality or ethnic group as participants agreed that terrorism was an attack against the true values of Islam and Muslims;
- To affirm the need to map the spheres of influence of religious leaders, legal schools, branches and institutions to improve coordination among religious actors.

¹⁴⁰ [IPU and others, 2021](#). The bloc included the IPU (through its High-Level Advisory Group on Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism), the Arab Parliament, the Inter-Parliamentary Committee of the G5 Sahel, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM), in cooperation with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

¹⁴¹ [US DoS, 2024c](#).

¹⁴² The outcome document additionally contained recommendations regarding tribal leaders, vulnerable groups and the interaction between government and parliament.

5.5 Leadership

One avenue of building bridges is to promote a model of leadership grounded in values or moral principles. Globethics is an international non-governmental organization, with UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) consultative status. It promotes ethical leadership as a foundation of a just, sustainable and inclusive world, with a mission of “empowering individuals and institutions towards excellence in responsible governance.”¹⁴³ Its work is grounded in the values of responsibility, inclusion and integrity.

Exercising ethical leadership is a task for all leaders, as executive director Dr. Fadi Daou says: *“We live in a big global challenge of mistrust, mistrust of an institution, mistrust of leaders and this is why we need to rebuild ethical leadership [...] on the religious level and ethical leadership on the political level.”* A pillar of ethical leadership is the joint pursuit of the “common good” as a shared goal of religious and political leaders.

Dr. Daou believes that in the promotion and protection of FoRB, ethical leadership can play an important role: *“We need law to protect the freedom of religion and belief and conscience and expression, but we need also values to make our communities, religious communities and citizens rebuild trust.”*

In 2024, the Satyarthi Movement for Global Compassion (SMGC) was launched by Indian social reformer and Nobel prize laureate Kailash Satyarthi together with fellow activist Sumedha Kailash to seek a paradigm shift in thinking towards governance characterized by compassionate leadership. This is grounded in the pursuit of understanding and prioritizing the needs of others, celebrating diversity and inclusive decision-making, thereby building stronger and more cohesive communities. The SMGC has developed a Compassionate Leadership Academy with UNESCO, which was officially launched during the UN Summit of the Future Action Days in 2024.¹⁴⁴

Many parliamentarians already embody good practices drawn from ethical and inclusive leadership.

Aisha Adams, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of Malawi

Aisha Adams is a practising Muslim in a country where 77.3% of the population is Christian and Muslims constitute an estimated 13.8%.¹⁴⁵ She reminds parliamentarians of their duty to uphold the rule of law and be role models for tolerance, especially when it comes to religion and belief:

“It is important to note that, as parliamentarians, we have the power and the status of influence and we influence the lives of our respective communities, as well as those of individual constituents. The same applies to religion. Religion too has the power and ability to influence the behaviour of individuals as well as communities. The question now is: how do we ensure that the power of the status of parliament is positively used in harnessing religion, religious beliefs in our communities, towards the attainment of peace, observance of human rights, tolerance and respect of one another’s beliefs? The Malawi Parliament believes that honest and continuous engagement in such matters is the key. As legislators, we need to reach out and be exemplary.”



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There are complementarities in the mandate of political and religious leaders: that they both wield influence, and *“both religion and politics ultimately aim at having communities or societies that are inclusive in the sense that all people in a particular society must feel that they have a sense of acceptability and belonging.”*

¹⁴³ [Globethics, 2025](#).

¹⁴⁴ [SMGC, 2024](#).

¹⁴⁵ [US DoS, 2024d](#).

5.6 Shared values

Shared cultural values, such as the ubuntu philosophy, can serve as a bridge for African parliamentary dialogue and cooperation, including with religious and belief leaders.

Ubuntu is a traditional philosophy from southern Africa that identifies the defining characteristic of being human in interconnectedness, reciprocity and community, which are the basis for the values underpinning human rights such as dignity, freedom and equality.

This is explained by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, one of its most influential proponents:

“The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God’s creation. In Africa recognition of our interdependence is called ubuntu in Nguni languages, or botho in Sotho, which is difficult to translate into English. It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. [...] Africa has a gift to give the world that the world needs desperately, this reminder that we are more than the sum of our parts: the reminder that strict individualism is debilitating. The world is going to have to learn the fundamental lesson that we are made for harmony, for interdependence. If we are ever truly to prosper, it will be only together.”¹⁴⁶

Archbishop Tutu served as the Chair of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which was set up by the South African parliament in 1995 via the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34, to investigate the crimes that occurred during apartheid. The TRC employed restorative justice to promote reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa, and was underpinned by ubuntu, which helped people to confess, forgive and look forward.



Madagascan youth advocate Prisca Fenosoa Maharavo during the 147th IPU Assembly in Luanda, Angola. © IPU

In an address to the global parliamentary community during the 147th IPU Assembly in Luanda in 2023, Madagascan youth advocate Prisca Fenosoa Maharavo echoed that the core threats to democracies lay in values that were antithetical to African culture: “*The deepest causes lie in the fall of the sense of belonging and the rise of an individualistic dimension. This is having a major impact in Africa, since our culture is exactly the opposite: it’s ubuntu, that is to say, I am because we are and the way decisions are taken by consensus.*”¹⁴⁷

Ms. Maharavo is co-founder of the Together for a New Africa (T4NA) network, which is guided by the goals outlined by the African Union’s Agenda 2063 and works to empower young leaders from 14 African countries to address contemporary challenges through the tools of co-leadership, good governance, a culture of unity,¹⁴⁸ and drawing on ubuntu wisdom.

¹⁴⁶ Desmond Tutu, 2004: 29, 31.

¹⁴⁷ Speech delivered at the 147th IPU Assembly (Luanda, Angola).

¹⁴⁸ Focolare Movement, [no date].

The Speaker of the National Assembly of Zimbabwe, Mr. Jacob F. N. Mudenda, considers the common values necessary for dialogue between religious and political leaders to be sustainable as “*the fundamental rights of democracy, the rule of law and the recognition of human dignity, which espouses our humane-ness. The being of personhood is embraced by the African anthropological and philosophical tenet of ubuntu, which means I am because you are and you are because we are.*”

Tangible shared values, such as those deriving from sports, also have the potential to bring together parliamentarians with religious leaders.

Case study: The Tahawor project in Lebanon

In 2023–2024, the Lebanese peacebuilding organization Adyan (which translates as “religions”) ran a project called Tahawor (“dialogue”) for Lebanese parliamentarians and their staff, encouraging an understanding of public service as being grounded in common values for the common good, rather than in sectarianism – an ongoing challenge faced by the Lebanese State.

Phases 1 and 2 of the project aimed to instigate values-driven reforms within the Lebanese Parliament. In phase 1, the project engaged 30 parliamentarians and their staff in round-table discussions to formulate long-term values-based reform policies. Key areas such as public service, justice, freedoms and transparency were addressed.

Throughout phase 2, the consensus extended to four thematic areas encompassing reforms, human rights, education and the environment. The participatory approach brought together MPs, parliamentary staff, experts and civil society actors, with the active involvement of specialized NGOs and research centres.

This collaborative approach emphasized inclusivity and the benefits of the participatory drafting of laws, addressing deficiencies in Lebanon’s legislative process. The overarching goal remained to initiate values-driven reforms, foster cross-party relationships among MPs, and cultivate a more efficient political culture for lasting good governance in Lebanon.¹⁴⁹

Case study: Olive tree planting at the Zambian Parliament

In June 2024, ahead of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, the Orthodox Archdiocese of Zambia and Mozambique in collaboration with the National Assembly of the Republic of Zambia, the National Zambian Olympic Committee and the University of Zambia organized an international symposium, *Olympic Ideal – Olympic Truce – Olympic Education: The threefold of the Olympic Movement in orbit*, in Lusaka from 13 to 14 June 2024. On the sidelines of this event, the Speaker of the National Assembly of Zambia, Hon. Nelly Mutti, and Orthodox Archbishop Ioannis of Zambia and Mozambique inaugurated a ceremony for planting the *Olympic Olive Tree of Peace* in front of the National Assembly to symbolize peace and to spread the message of the Olympic Truce to the Zambian youth and nation. This was the first time an olive tree had been planted at an African parliament.

Ms. Mutti said of the gesture: “*The Olympic Movement has also a fundamental pillar which is the Olympic Truce, meaning peace. Therefore, there is a need for all stakeholders, parliamentarians, sports figures and citizens alike to advocate for peace amidst the current global conflicts.*”¹⁵⁰

While Zambia is a majority Christian country, the Orthodox community is too small to register in official statistics. Its origins date back to the late 19th century, when members of a family from Crete (Greece) made their home in what today constitutes Zambia.¹⁵¹ This community exists under the Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa.

The Orthodox community enjoys a good relationship with the Zambian Government, which has committed to developing self-regulatory frameworks for church and faith-based groups, promoting interdenominational dialogue, preserving religious heritage sites, and coordinating public religious celebrations. The Orthodox Archdiocese of Zambia and Mozambique has its headquarters in Lusaka.



(L–R) His Eminence the Orthodox Archbishop of Zambia and Mozambique Ioannis; Athanasia Tsoumeleka, 2004 Olympic Games gold medalist; Moses Moyo, Second Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Zambia; Nelly Mutti, Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Zambia; and Malungo Chisangano, First Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Zambia during the ceremony of the planting of the Olympic Tree of Peace in June 2024. © Orthodox Archdiocese of Zambia and Mozambique/ Sotirios Chronis

149 [Adyan Foundation, 2024.](#)

150 [Parliament of Zambia, 2024.](#)

151 [Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, 2020.](#)

5.7 National unity and peaceful coexistence

Interfaith engagement by parliamentarians can contribute to building trust between and across communities, fostering solidarity, and strengthening national unity.

By championing shared values and priorities, such engagement helps counter divisive narratives and reinforce a shared sense of belonging.

Imthiaz Bakeer Markar, former National List member of the Parliament of Sri Lanka and an advocate for national unity

Sri Lanka's religious demography (from the 2012 census) indicates that its population is 70.2% Buddhist (majority Theravada), 12.6% Hindu, 9.7% Muslim (majority Sunni, with Ahmadiyya and Shia minorities) and 7.4% Christian (majority Roman Catholic). Religion and ethnicity are closely related. Most Sinhalese are Buddhists and most Tamils are Hindus, with a strong Christian minority. Muslims are formally recognized as a separate group.¹⁵²

Sri Lanka, which has an ethno-religious dimension, suffered a civil war between 1983 and 2009; and some intercommunal tensions still persist. The country has also witnessed cycles of anti-Muslim sentiment in the last decade, which has accelerated since the 2019 bombing of several Catholic churches and hotels by ISIL-inspired individuals.

Coming from a Muslim family, Mr. Bakeer Markar attended a Sinhala-Buddhist secondary school, and became the first Muslim to head the Junior and Senior Hostels Prefects Board. He has been involved in the national parliament since 1988 and has also served in government. Committed to fostering national unity, he founded the Bakeer Markar Centre for National Unity (BMCNU)¹⁵³ in 1997, while the civil war was ongoing – one year after the Parliament passed Act No. 21 for the establishment of a Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL).¹⁵⁴

The BMCNU undertakes activities “to promote, encourage, assist and foster activities for the advancement of national unity, intercommunal amity, racial and religious harmony, goodwill and peace amongst people”.¹⁵⁵ It has supported activities of the Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation, such as workshops to advocate for a positive stance on reconciliation within the media.

In the Sri Lankan Parliament, Imthiaz Bakeer Markar was a member of the Sectoral Oversight Committee on Reconciliation and National Unity and the Ministerial Consultative Committee on Mass Media. Mr. Bakeer Markar is well regarded across communities for his ability to foster meaningful ethno-religious dialogues, ease tensions and remain committed to the cause of national unity.

His homepage quotes a verse from the Qur'an 5:2: “Cooperate with one another in goodness and righteousness, and do not cooperate in sin and transgression”.

Case study: The Bahá'í Community in Kazakhstan

In April 2020, the Bahá'í Community in Kazakhstan, concerned at the isolation the pandemic was bringing and at some existing tensions, organized an online meeting to share good practices and wisdoms in promoting community cohesion. It invited representatives from academia, public institutions, civil society, and religions and beliefs.

A key point of discussion was the need to strengthen the relationship between public authorities and communities, especially at a time when governments were having to make decisions in extraordinary circumstances. Mr. Arman Kozhakhmetov, a former member of the Parliament of Kazakhstan in attendance, said: “In these circumstances, the importance of mutual trust becomes clear. [...] Promoting trust requires open and clear decision-making. When people see that mistakes are recognized and corrected, trust is born and issues can quickly be solved.”¹⁵⁶

Case study: The iftar meal in Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous country in the African continent (around 231 million). Its religious demography sees an almost equal division between Muslims (50%) and Christians (48.1%), and the country has experienced faith-based conflict.¹⁵⁷ In April 2024, the Muslim Ramadan and the Christian Lent period coincided. The President of the Senate of Nigeria, Mr. Godswill Akpabio, invited the Muslim and Christian senators to a joint celebration of iftar, the fast-breaking evening meal. He used this as an occasion to reinforce religion as a unifying, not dividing matter:

“It is not a coincidence that God is merging the fasting of the Muslims and that of Christians. The intention is to show that we may have different religions, but we have only one God and that God is the Supreme God that looks after all of us. We need to continue to work together as brothers and sisters of the one Almighty God, for the benefit of our dear country. Religion cannot divide us. [...] And this period of Ramadan, this period of Easter, reconnects us with God so that we know that we are not in this world for nothing. He sends us here for a purpose and that purpose is to live in peace with one another, love one another, pray together, and work for one another to ensure progress for humanity.”¹⁵⁸

152 [US DoS, 2024k](#).

153 [BMCNU, 2024](#).

154 [HRCSL, Act No. 21 of 1996](#).

155 [BMCNU, 2000](#).

156 [BWNS, 2020](#).

157 [US DoS, 2024f](#).

158 [Punch Newspapers, 2024](#).

5.8 Social engagement

In the UK, faith-based organizations make an important contribution to society, materially as well as through leadership.

According to Mr. Alex Sobel, member of the UK Parliament: *“Religious organizations are important players in so many areas: in issues around poverty and inequality, education, health, around refugees and immigration, in the charity and NGO sector generally.”* In 2010, the City of Leeds had only one food bank for 0.75 million people. Now there are 18 food banks, their growth spurred by an increase in poverty. Almost all the food banks are run by religious communities. Religious spaces such as a Sikh gurdwara will often provide a meal.

Religious and belief actors, rooted in civil society, often enjoy high trust among citizens, and on this basis can be important allies for MPs. As Dame Karen Bradley, member of the House of Commons, echoes:

“Faith groups can reach into society and into communities in a way that politicians simply can’t. The trust that is given to a faith leader by people, by members of the public, by those that elect us to be their political leaders cannot be understated. It is those relationships and that trust that gives us opportunities to deliver on policy.”

In 2012, an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Faith and Society was founded at a time when British society was becoming more secular but faith-based social activism was growing: around one in four charities in the UK was faith-based.¹⁵⁹ The APPG aimed to facilitate dialogue between faith organizations, local authorities and parliamentarians, provide a platform to share good practices, and highlight the important contribution of faith organizations to British society in areas such as healthcare, social care, housing, education, food banks, employment and social cohesion.

Previous Chair of the APPG Sir Stephen Timms (current Minister of State for Social Security and Disability) said: *“The new All-Party Group wants to hear from innovative faith-based organizations at work in local communities. They often develop solutions to society’s key problems but can go unrecognized in Whitehall. We want to see that change. And we will look at whether regulatory changes would enable them better to realize and sustain their potential.”*

In 2014, the APPG launched a Faith Covenant to provide guidance for engagement between faith communities and local authorities.¹⁶⁰ The Faith Covenant is a draft that should be adapted to local contexts. To date, it has been signed by 33 local authorities in the UK, as recently as November 2024.

The Faith Covenant

The Faith Covenant is built on the following principles:

- Faith communities are free to practise their beliefs and religious observances without restriction, and to raise their voice in public debate and to be respected, within the framework of UK law.
- Public services and faith-based social action should respect service users from all backgrounds, with no discrimination on the grounds of religion, gender, marital status, race, ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation, mental capability or long-term condition.
- The voice, participation and solutions that faith communities bring are important, and consultation should enable them to be brought to bear for the benefit of the wider community.
- Organizations and services are stronger for drawing on diverse sources of funding; monopolies of funding, action and participation are damaging.

The Faith Covenant contains the following commitments:

Local authorities commit to welcome the involvement of faith groups in the delivery of services and social action on an equal basis with other groups. In addition, they commit to:

- Building relationships and trust with faith groups.
- Adopting strategies for the engagement of faith communities in consultation exercises.
- Encouraging faith groups and their members to be involved in the reshaping and redesign of local services.
- Sharing training and learning opportunities between faith communities and the local authority.

Faith-based organizations commit to work actively with local authorities in the design and delivery of services to the public. In addition, they commit to:

- Seeking opportunities to bring people together to serve the community, particularly its poorest and most isolated members.
- Serving equally all local residents seeking to access the public services they offer, irrespective of their religion or belief, gender, marital status, race, ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation, mental capability, long-term condition or disability.
- Using resources provided for delivering a service wholly for that purpose, and not for any other.
- Ensuring excellence in child protection, health and safety, accountability and transparency.
- Responding to consultations where appropriate.
- Sharing training and learning opportunities between faith communities and the local authority.

¹⁵⁹ Rachel Wharton and Lucy de Las Casas, 2016.

¹⁶⁰ APPG on Faith and Society, 2014.

The APPG on Faith and Society was last registered prior to the 4 July 2024 general election and is currently inactive.

The Salvation Army, a church and charitable organization operating globally, is a designated national first responder for the UK's national referral mechanism with regard to victims of modern slavery. First-responder agencies identify potential victims, gather data and then refer their case on to the competent authority. Since 2011, the Salvation Army has coordinated support for victims, either through the designated government "modern slavery victim care" contract, or through their own volunteer service. The Salvation Army remains engaged with parliament in this work, including by knowledge-sharing with UK and Commonwealth parliamentarians, providing written and oral evidence to parliamentary committees, and conducting advocacy with parliamentarians.

The Santa Marta Group was set up in 2014 as a network of representatives from religions and beliefs, law enforcement, civil society and the private sector to combat human trafficking. It was supported by Pope Francis and part of its work includes engaging governments and parliaments in efforts to combat human trafficking. It was involved in the consultation processes ahead of the UK's 2015 Modern Slavery Act, and in 2017 the Santa Marta Group director made a submission to the inquiry into modern slavery conducted by the Australian Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, asking to share its expertise for consideration by Parliament when developing its own legislation.¹⁶¹ In February 2024, at the behest of Spanish MEP Juan Ignacio Zoido Álvarez, it co-organized an event in the European Parliament with the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European

Union (COMECE), *The role of churches and faith-based organizations in fighting trafficking in human beings*.¹⁶²

In Australia, the education system includes faith-based schools. In 2023, the 47th Australian Parliament established a group entitled "Parliamentary Friends of Religious Schools and Faith Communities", with the goal of providing "a non-partisan forum for parliamentarians to meet and interact with representatives of religious schools and all faith communities, enabling a greater understanding of the needs of religious schools to provide a genuine, high-quality, faith-based education to parents seeking an education that aligns with their values and beliefs, and the ability of communities of faith to manifest their beliefs, consistent with the ICCPR".¹⁶³ The Chair of this group is Senator Deborah O'Neill, a former Catholic school teacher for religious studies.

The Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mr. Milton Dick, has actively engaged with religious communities throughout his tenure as Speaker, including a visit to the BAPS Swaminarayan Hindu temple in Canberra to give a presentation on parliamentary and civics education, and hosting the annual Australian Catholic University Federal Parliamentary Interfaith Breakfast, with the participation of more than 90 religious leaders from more than 10 different faiths. Mr. Dick refers to the inclusive nature of Parliament:

"Parliament is very welcoming and open to people of all different faiths. There's a number of events and activities held right throughout a parliamentary year, welcoming different organizations, religions, people of faith, primarily through our parliamentary friendship groups. From time to time, big events will be held of multifaith communities."



Australian Senator Deborah O'Neill, Co-Chair of the Parliamentary Friends of Religious Schools and Faith Communities, spoke at the group's inaugural event in Canberra in 2023. © Deborah O'Neill

¹⁶¹ David Ryall, 2017.

¹⁶² COMECE, 2024.

¹⁶³ Parliament of Australia, 2024.



Conference Meeting of Parliamentarians and Religious Leaders for Coexistence and Peace on 12 February 2024 in Sarajevo.
© Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina

5.9 Parliamentary diplomacy

(Inter-)parliamentary events dedicated to interfaith and intercultural dialogue are important forums for parliamentarians, together with different stakeholders, to share their own good practices in efforts to promote peace, inclusion, human rights and the rule of law, and to learn from subject matter experts.

Conference meeting of parliamentarians and religious leaders for coexistence and peace

In 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in strategic cooperation with the Muslim World League, organized a *Conference meeting of parliamentarians and religious leaders for coexistence and peace*, which was held in the debate chamber of the Parliament in Sarajevo. Sarajevo was chosen to host the conference as a city steeped in ethno-religious diversity, and which had experienced and overcome identity-based conflict. Bosnia and Herzegovina has tried and tested experience of reconciliation and fostering peaceful coexistence.

The conference meeting concluded with the presentation of the Sarajevo Declaration, which outlined a number of shared principles, such as respect for human life and for the rule of law. It outlines seven recommendations to advance these principles. Especially relevant for parliaments is the fourth principle, which urges societal institutions to embrace the concepts of human brotherhood, to deepen shared universal values, to transcend conventional differences, and to promote

awareness of the paramount importance of the constitution and legal frameworks within each nation.¹⁶⁴

The title of the conference meeting recalls an earlier initiative founded in 1985, the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival.¹⁶⁵

Inter-parliamentary conference on the protection of cultural heritage

In May 2024, the 6th World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue (WFID) took place in Baku, Azerbaijan, entitled *Dialogue for peace and global security: Cooperation and interconnectivity*. It was organized by the Republic of Azerbaijan, in partnership with UNESCO, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), the Council of Europe, the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) and UN Tourism (UNWTO). The sixth edition of the forum included an inter-parliamentary conference, *The role and best practices of the legislature in the protection of cultural heritage*, based on the understanding of cultural heritage as representing “the collective identity and history of a nation, embodying its traditions, values, and aspirations”.¹⁶⁶ Many of these are tied to religion and belief.¹⁶⁷ The event was attended by current or former members of national parliaments, and representatives of international parliamentary institutions.¹⁶⁸

In her opening statement to the inter-parliamentary conference, Ms. Sahiba Gafarova, the Speaker of the Milli Majlis (National Assembly of Azerbaijan), said:

¹⁶⁴ Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Muslim World League (MWL), 2024.

¹⁶⁵ John Phillip Santos Papers, 1988.

¹⁶⁶ 6th WFID, 2024.

¹⁶⁷ UNAOC, 2019.

¹⁶⁸ UN Web TV, 2024.

“Cultural heritage represents identity, history, traditions and values of people. Protecting this heritage and passing it on to the future generations demands proper institutional and legislative approaches and active involvement of all stakeholders to these processes. In this sense, parliaments have an important role to play, not only at the national but also at the international level. [...] Numerous laws adopted by our Parliament, including the Law on culture, the Law on protection of historical and cultural monuments, and other laws and amendments, have been of crucial importance for establishing effective legal frameworks on these issues.¹⁶⁹ Our Parliament holds regular public hearings on various aspects of the protection of cultural heritage. [...] Besides, the active preparation of the dedicated committee in our Parliament, the Culture Committee, with the Minister of Culture, demonstrates fruitful parliament-government collaboration in the very process of drafting, adopting and enforcing the laws in the field.”

Insights and good practices shared by the delegates included:

- The joint responsibility of the state and the citizenry for the preservation of cultural heritage, upheld in a number of constitutions (for example, Uzbekistan, Art. 49; Belarus, Art. 15 and Art. 54).
- The importance of instilling a sense of ownership and pride among citizens and of preserving the cultural heritage of all communities, including indigenous, minority and marginalized groups.
- Threats to the protection of cultural heritage included discrimination, intolerance, low scientific, cultural and religious awareness, and abuse of ethnic or religious groups. Intercultural dialogue, grounded in an appreciation of multiculturalism, could be a helpful antidote.
- The importance of education in instilling values of understanding and empathy towards other cultures should be integrated into the education system, beginning in primary school.

- Multi-stakeholder dialogue, partnerships and coordination provide a space to share experiences, exchange good practices, effectively react to challenges and enhance conservation strategies.

Also on the theme of the protection of cultural heritage, the IPU membership previously adopted a resolution, *Ensuring lasting protection against destruction and deterioration for the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of humanity*, at the 134th IPU Assembly (Lusaka, 2016).¹⁷⁰

International Parliament for Tolerance and Peace

The 11th Plenary Session of the International Parliament for Tolerance and Peace (IPTP), hosted by the National Assembly of the Kingdom of Cambodia in Phnom Penh in November 2024, was entitled “*A quest for peace, reconciliation and tolerance*”. Around 300 delegates representing 53 countries attended the event. During the general debate, delegates from Asia and the Pacific, Africa, Europe and Latin America exchanged views on the important contribution of parliamentarians to national unity and coexistence through peacebuilding and reconciliation processes, as well as on the defining role of partnerships between parliaments, governments and civil society.

At the conclusion of this event, the President of the Cambodian National Assembly, Ms. Khuon Sudary, presented the *Phnom Penh Declaration on the endorsement of the “Universal Peace Charter: For people and the planet”*. Parliamentarians in attendance committed to “foster harmony among religious and belief systems, cultures and civilizations through dialogue, mutual respect and cooperation in upholding the spirit of promoting people-to-people connectivity, cultural understandings and religious tolerance.” The Universal Peace Charter also contains several references to interfaith dialogue, with Article 12 dedicated to religious and cultural tolerance.¹⁷¹

Recommendations for parliaments and parliamentarians

- Recognize the impactful role of religions, beliefs and faith-based organizations in promoting peace, security, national unity, service provision, and strengthening community resilience, and engage with religious or belief representatives and communities to effectively address issues of shared concern
- Identify respect for the rule of law and shared values as the foundation for collaboration between parliament and religious or belief communities, and anchor joint efforts in universally recognized human rights standards
- Consider the establishment of dedicated parliamentary structures, such as working groups, committees, or cross-party caucuses on interfaith and intercultural dialogue, to facilitate this engagement in a consistent and inclusive manner
- Promote greater cooperation between religious and belief representatives and national authorities in combating crimes and protecting the victims thereof
- Develop guidelines for engagement between faith actors and political decision makers
- Facilitate the awareness-raising and capacity-building of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff through seminars and training programmes on religious literacy, and develop guidelines for ethical and inclusive leadership
- Engage in parliamentary diplomacy through public dialogues, and initiatives to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue and peaceful coexistence at both national and international levels

169 [Republic of Azerbaijan, 2012](#); [Republic of Azerbaijan, 1998](#).

170 [IPU, 2016b](#).

171 [IPTP, 2024](#), para. 7. A profile of the IPTP can be found in Part 1 of the present report.



Interview with Mr. Denis Zvizdić (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Mr. Denis Zvizdić has been the Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosniac representative of the rotating collegium since 2022. In 2024 he spearheaded the Conference Meeting of Parliamentarians and Religious Leaders for Coexistence and Peace. From 2015 to 2019 he served as Chair of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

How would you assess social cohesion between different religions or beliefs in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a rich ethno-religious landscape. The main groups are Bosniacs (predominantly Muslim), Serbs (predominantly Orthodox Christian), and Croats (predominantly Catholic). A Jewish community has also lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina for centuries, and is very active and socially engaged. Each group has its own cultural and religious practices, contributing to a rich and diverse society. This is why the capital city of Bosnia and Herzegovina – Sarajevo – is often called the “Jerusalem of Europe.” In Sarajevo, for more than four centuries, there has been a mosque, a Catholic cathedral, an Orthodox church, and a synagogue located within 200 metres of one another, a singularity in continental Europe.

The legacy of the War of Aggression in the 1990s has left deep divisions, and ethnic nationalism often influences political and social interactions. This is why I try, not only as a member of the chairmanship of the House of Representatives, but also as an ordinary person to work on interfaith dialogue. I especially emphasize together, with each other, not next to each other. If Bosnia and Herzegovina loses that wealth of diversity, then it is no longer Bosnia and Herzegovina in its essence and spirit.

What legal provisions exist regarding the upholding of freedom of religion or belief?

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a secular country. The Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It also recognizes the rights of national minorities, including the right to practise their religion and to keep their traditional and cultural practices. There is a Law on Religious Freedom, which was enacted to further detail the rights and responsibilities related to religious practice. As a member of the Council of Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina is bound by the European Convention on Human Rights, which provides a broader legal framework for upholding freedom of religion or belief and other human rights.

What good practices exist relating to efforts to facilitate interfaith dialogue for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies?

My party/coalition supports establishing interfaith committees within the Parliamentary Assembly, which facilitate discussions on common goals and promote cooperation on social issues. We also propose legislation aimed at protecting the rights of religious minorities and fostering an environment of tolerance.

Some parliamentarians have initiated programmes that involve citizens from various faith backgrounds in discussions about community issues. Engaging youth and community leaders in these programmes fosters a culture of understanding and respect.

I am very proud that the Parliamentary Assembly, together with the Muslim World League, organized in February 2024 an International Conference of Parliamentary and Religious Leaders for Coexistence and Peace, which was one of the most important events in the last decade in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Have there been parliamentary efforts to promote reconciliation or trust-building between different ethno-religious communities?

Parliamentarians from different political backgrounds have come together to co-sponsor initiatives focused on reconciliation. This bipartisan approach demonstrates a commitment to unity and can inspire broader cooperation among communities. Parliamentarians have organized local community forums and town hall meetings that encourage dialogue among diverse groups. These events allow citizens to voice their concerns and ideas, fostering a sense of inclusion and ownership in the reconciliation process.

Also, some parliamentarians received representatives of NGOs engaged in trust-building between different ethno-religious communities and hosted events that honour the victims of past conflicts and promote remembrance, to help build empathy and understanding. These events often include representatives from all communities, reinforcing the message of shared history and collective healing.

Personally, I think that supporting educational programmes that focus on teaching the importance of diversity, tolerance, and reconciliation in schools can lay the groundwork for a more harmonious future generation.



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Outlook

“What is peace? Is it just the absence of war? Definitely not. But it’s definitely the presence of freedom, of justice and solidarity. In order to come to that, I think we all need to go back to school. We need to educate the young religious leaders in the same way we need to see that there is more respect for religion in the different political worlds, in the system.”

Emmanuel Adamakis, Metropolitan Elder of Chalcedon

The present report represents a pioneering contribution to the emerging field of parliamentary engagement with religion and belief for the upholding of fundamental rights and freedoms and the rule of law, for the promotion of peaceful, just and inclusive societies. It intends to be an indicative study and invites people to further exploration of the themes, tailored to the specific country, religion, religious or other context.

Other areas of relevance for further investigation, which go beyond the scope of the present report, include:

Threats and opportunities associated with AI: These include risks associated with deepfakes, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and concerns around regulation, as well as new potential to engage congregants and constituents online – all areas of relevance for parliaments and religious and belief actors alike.

Meaningful engagement of youth: Youth might be the fastest-growing demographic worldwide, but they are under-represented in decision-making roles about the future they are set to inherit. Youth under 30 constitute less than 3% of parliamentarians worldwide. Similar under-representation can be observed in many religions and beliefs where leadership or decision-making functions are limited for youth.

The IPU has an established programme for youth empowerment, and many interfaith actors have established youth networks or youth-focused programming. There is potential to be harnessed for bringing together young political and religious actors and giving them a more prominent seat at the table.

Restart to dialogue: Interfaith dialogue was severely disrupted following the events in Israel and Gaza on and after 7 October 2023. Since then, interfaith dialogue has been difficult, as the conflict has taken on, or been given, a religious dimension. These events and their regional and global repercussions, compounded with other global conflicts containing a religious dimension, have led to a sharp increase in different forms of identity-based hatred and suspicion, many grounded in religion or belief. These tensions are being felt in national parliaments too.

Conversations are happening between political, religious, civil society and other actors about how to respond to the signs of the times, and invite people to a dialogue which rejects exclusion, violence and dehumanization in the name of religion or belief – or against people based on religion or belief – and focuses on the shared rights and dignity of all persons.

Parliamentarians, as representatives of the people, are an essential part of these efforts for the common good.

The conversation will be continued at the Second Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue (Rome, June 2025), which will bring together political and religious leaders along with representatives of faith-based and civil society organizations and subject matter experts to explore avenues for joint action to promote the rule of law, peace and inclusion in our societies.

The IPU welcomes further input from national parliaments, Associate Members and Permanent Observer organizations, and also from other interested individuals and organizations. We invite you to contact us at: postbox@ipu.org.

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Methodology and data sources

Parts 1 and 2 of the *Parliamentary Report on Religion and Belief* make use of a range of data sources:

Interviews:

From 2022 to 2024, a total of 55 interviews were conducted with 62 parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, IPU Secretariat staff, religious leaders and other experts. The interviews were conducted in a hybrid manner. In-person interviews took place during the Annual Parliamentary Hearing at the United Nations (New York, USA) in February 2022, the 144th IPU Assembly (Bali, Indonesia) in March 2022, the 145th IPU Assembly (Kigali, Rwanda) in October 2022, at the first Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue (Marrakesh, Morocco) in June 2023, and at the 147th IPU Assembly (Luanda, Angola) in October 2023. Remote interviews took place online from 2022 to 2024. Three interview responses were submitted in written form. Of the respondents, 69% were male and 31% were female.

Survey:

A survey was issued to IPU Member Parliaments and Permanent Observer organizations in March 2022. Responses were received from 53 parliaments and 1 Permanent Observer organization.

Written input:

- Declarations, summary records, resolutions and transcriptions of recordings from IPU Assemblies relating to interfaith and intercultural dialogue
- IPU publications and the IPU's open-data platform, Parline
- Resolutions, commentaries, handbooks and toolkits from relevant bodies such as the UN and parliamentary networks
- Publications of organizations working in the field of religious engagement and FoRB
- Secondary literature on themes related to the report.

Events:

- Parliamentary Conference on Interfaith Dialogue: Working together for our common future (Marrakesh, 2023)
- Conference meeting of parliamentarians and religious leaders for coexistence and peace (Sarajevo, 2024)
- 6th World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue, Inter-parliamentary Conference: The role and best practices of the legislature in the protection of cultural heritage (Baku, 2024).

Consultations:

Internal consultations were held with different departments of the IPU Secretariat, including those focusing on human rights, gender/youth, counter-terrorism and prevention of violent extremism, to identify areas of intersection between parliamentary work and religion and belief. Ongoing external consultations were held with the UN, with faith-based, international and civil society organizations, with religious leaders, and also with individual experts.

Review process:

The document underwent an internal review process as well as an external peer review by subject matter experts.

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