

Advancing Freedom of Religion or Belief:

The Impact of IPPFoRB's Network in 2022

The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) is a global network of current and former parliamentarians who advocate for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) around the world.

With established regional networks in Southeast Asia - Southeast Asian Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (SEAPFoRB) and Africa – African Parliamentarians' Association for Human Rights (AfriPAHR), supported by the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) and the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA) respectively, IPPFoRB strives to make a lasting impact across continents.

At the core of IPPFoRB's mission is a comprehensive theory of change that drives our efforts to achieve meaningful impact. Our theory of change is based on the belief that by connecting, equipping, and supporting parliamentarians, we can foster a global movement for freedom of religion or belief. Through capacity building, provision of relevant tools and resources, and facilitating collaboration and exchange, we empower parliamentarians to become informed and effective advocates of FoRB. By engaging in competence-building activities, and global and regional actions, they develop the necessary skills, strategies, and networks to address freedom of religion or belief issues in their respective contexts.

In this article, we take a moment to reflect on the activities carried out in 2022 by IPPFoRB, its partners, and individual parliamentarians who have been instrumental in driving positive change. While it may take years to fully evaluate the societal impact of these efforts, we explore the potential and significance of their work in advancing inclusive and non-discriminatory environments for religious and belief communities and individuals. Additionally, we consider critical reflections that can inform and improve future endeavours.

From Building Competence and Producing Tools...

Imagine a school where students are prohibited from attending classes because they wear religious symbols. Such a restriction limits both the student's right to access education and their ability to express their religious identity and practice their beliefs fully¹.

The intersection of the right to FoRB and access to education was one of the common issues in Ghana and Malawi, identified by IPPFoRB's partner in Africa, the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA), through an assessment of FoRB in both countries. This was one of the topics at the centre of the discussions that took place during the IPPFoRB Academy held in Oxford in 2022, with the participation of MPs from Ghana, Malawi, Indonesia, and Malaysia. During the Academy, participants discussed with FoRB experts the rights involved and their intersection, and they devised concrete strategies to address the limitations imposed by some schools on children from Muslim and Rastafarian communities, hindering their enjoyment of both rights.

Upon the return, the participant from Ghana took up the issue in one of the schools and engaged with the Ministry of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education, and the school authorities. Today, all students in that school have the right to exercise their choice to wear or not to wear religious attire as long as they adhere to the school's rules.

The IPPFoRB Academy is just one avenue for parliamentarians to enhance their competence on FoRB and related human rights. Webinars on FoRB and health, FoRB and climate change, and workshops in Bolivia, Western Balkans and Southeast Asia organized last year provided opportunities for MPs to learn, share their expertise, and identify ways to address specific FoRB issues in their respective countries.

Moreover, a range of research-based tools has been developed for MPs with the aim of supporting them in their work. For example, The Report mapping legislation restricting

¹ For more cases about FoRB violations you may consult the following sources: [European Court for Human Rights](#), Inter-American Court of Human Rights case [CASO PAVEZ PAVEZ VS. CHILE](#), African Commission on Human and People's Rights landmark [Endroits decision](#)

freedom of religion or belief in ASEAN countries and Timor Leste, produced by SEAPFoRB/APHR, drew the attention of MPs from Timor Leste to the challenges non-Catholics face when trying to obtain a marriage certificate. One of the MPs pointed out the lack of a clear definition in the Civil Registration Bill that is currently being discussed by the legislative committee and the need for MPs to address the topic. MPs from Ghana and Malawi could identify concrete areas where they as lawmakers could make a change thanks to the mapping of the FoRB situation in both countries conducted by ACEPA. In Western Balkans, exhaustive research that combined desk study and interviews with about 85 stakeholders, resulted in the document “Freedom of Religion or Belief in Western Balkans: A Roadmap for Parliamentarians”. Focusing on 4 countries in the region, the “Roadmap” led to some concrete outcomes such as including FoRB as part of the party programs and served as the basis of starting a dialogue about regional cooperation around FoRB, during the meeting held in Ohrid last year.

...to Taking Action!

The findings of the annual IPPFoRB survey highlight the significant impact of training activities and workshops in facilitating productive discussions and fostering positive changes.

73% of the respondents found participation in IPPFoRB events valuable for engaging in dialogue with other key actors such as politicians, religious leaders, civil society members, and journalists. Additionally, 50% of the respondents found the knowledge acquired from these events useful for sharing information with fellow parliamentarians, while 33% utilised their attendance at IPPFoRB events to plan initiatives in their own countries.

Furthermore, the survey revealed the proactive role of MPs in driving transformations in policies and legislation pertaining to religious or belief communities and individuals. Out of 53 surveyed parliamentarians, 41 reported making contributions towards more FoRB-sensitive legislation or initiating and participating in actions that have the potential to bring about positive policy changes in this domain. Additionally, over half of the respondents initiated or joined actions aimed at promoting positive attitudes towards religious or belief communities and individuals.

Parliamentarians’ actions included engaging with representatives of diverse religious communities, transcending their own religious affiliation, attending religious festivals, being mediators in conflicts

between religious leaders and supporting the construction of religious sites. MPs have also taken the initiative to raise civic awareness regarding religious plurality during elections, fostering a more inclusive political environment. Some of the MPs in the network engaged with local governance structures and religious leaders, forging partnerships to address religious freedom challenges at grassroots levels. Others have monitored authorities' actions concerning religious freedom and have utilized platforms such as op-eds, statements, and social media campaigns to raise awareness and advocate for FoRB.

International Advocacy has always been a cornerstone of the IPPFoRB work. When parliamentarians worldwide address the same issue, it creates a powerful ripple effect. Their collective voice amplifies visibility, inspires solidarity, and puts pressure on governments and international bodies. Some of the examples of the advocacy actions undertaken by IPPFoRB parliamentarians in 2022 include addressing issues such as women's rights and female leadership, advocating for the release of Leah Sharibu and 110 other girls abducted in 2018, calling the Cuba government to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB on an official country visit, etc.

Last year marked a milestone in the multi-year advocacy action in Indonesia, where a broad range of actors, including parliamentarians, civil society actors and academics, joined forces in advocating against blasphemy provisions in the draft Criminal code. A number of consultations, webinars, private meetings and public calls have been made and state authorities seemed to respond to the calls for a broader consultation on the draft text. However, even sustained efforts do not always result in the desired outcomes. The new criminal code, adopted at the end of 2022, was called "disastrous" by Human Rights Watch. The APHR intends to continue monitoring the developments and in particular the interpretation and implementation of the law.

It is essential to recognize that the effect of international advocacy is not always immediate or linear. It may take time and multiple actors' engagement for the ripples to spread and for significant shifts to occur. But we believe that the cumulative impact of sustained advocacy efforts can be profound, leading to long-lasting systemic change.

Sustainability: fostering lasting impact beyond parliamentary terms

One of the questions we ask in our annual survey is *"During the past year, how did you promote human rights and, more specifically, freedom of religion or belief in your country?"*. This time, when we collected responses, one answer stood out. One of the respondents honestly admitted: *"Since there*

was no platform, I did not do anything." This sincere answer underscores the critical necessity of platforms like IPPFoRB in mobilizing parliamentarians and harnessing their potential to advance human rights and freedom of religion or belief. The response highlights the challenges faced by MPs who are willing to advocate for these fundamental rights but lack the necessary avenues for meaningful engagement.

However, the work doesn't end there. Another significant dilemma, related to the specifics of working with parliamentarians, is *How to make sure that the results of our work will last in time?*

To address the question of sustainability, IPPFoRB continually seeks ways to ensure that the results of our work endure beyond individual parliamentary terms. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, contextual considerations guide our approach. One model explored across the IPPFoRB network involves establishing parliamentary FoRB caucuses and integrating FoRB work into existing parliamentary structures. Notably, the previous year saw the initiation of parliamentary caucus setups in Ghana, Malawi, Chile, and Brazil. In these nations, the groundwork was laid to foster sustained engagement among parliamentarians. The IPPFoRB partner FoRB Leadership Network (FoRB LN) supported the establishment of FoRB caucuses in The Gambia and Sierra Leone and mobilised groups of parliamentarians for such purposes in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Recognizing the significance of regional networks and building on the experience of the two regional parliamentarians' networks well established in Africa (African Parliamentarians Association for Human Rights) and Southeast Asia (Southeast Asian Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief), IPPFoRB has ambitiously set out to support similar initiatives in Latin America and Western Balkans. These initiatives not only strengthen the work at the national level but also foster collaborative efforts within regions.

Conclusions

In the words of Nazila Ghanea, the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, "The role of parliamentarians in monitoring, reporting, and following up on freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief cannot be overestimated." And as we reflect on the work that has been done and the challenges that the global community is still facing, it is clear that our journey towards the achievement of the IPPFoRB's mission of FoRB for everyone everywhere is far from over. Looking ahead, we are committed to further strengthening our efforts and expanding our partnerships to foster a lasting and positive impact for religious and belief communities and individuals worldwide.

We recognize the critical importance of continuously **building the competence** of parliamentarians and in 2023, in addition to thematic webinars and targeted discussions about current challenges to the freedom of religion or belief, this year, the IPPFoRB will conduct the Academy in Latin America for MPs from the region.

IPPFoRB also plans to continue supporting the establishment of more **national FoRB caucuses** and similar initiatives that enhance parliamentary engagement on FoRB. Building on the success of our partnerships in Africa and Southeast Asia, we are determined to expand our **regional work** in Latin America and the Western Balkans. Recognizing the unique context and challenges within each region, we will work closely with regional networks and relevant stakeholders to foster collaborative efforts.

Expanding Partnerships: Collaboration is key to driving meaningful change. In the years ahead, we will actively seek to expand our partnerships both globally and regionally. By forging alliances with international, regional, and national organizations that share our values and our commitment to FoRB, we can synchronize our efforts, leverage resources, and multiply our impact. Together, we can work towards creating inclusive and non-discriminatory environments where religious and belief communities and individuals can thrive.