

# **“We have values that are needed” Faith Actors and their role in Civic Space**

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## Abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DCA	Dan Church Aid
FBO	Faith-based Organisation
KII	Key Informant Interview
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics
UN	United Nations

## Table of contents

Abbreviations	2
Acknowledgements, Suggested reference	4
Foreword	5
Executive summary	7
1. Introduction	9
1.1 Background	9
1.2 Objective of the research	9
1.3 Methodology	9
1.4 Structure of the report	10
2. Literature review	11
2.1 What is civic space?	11
2.2 Is civic space shrinking?	12
2.3 What are faith actors?	13
2.4 Are faith actors supporting or opposing civic space?	14
2.5 How is shrinking civic space uniquely affecting faith actors?	15
3. Findings	16
3.1 Civic space under threat	16
3.2 Faith actors contributing to strengthening civic space	21
3.3 How and why some faith actors contribute to the shrinking of civic space	29
3.4 Learning from faith actors	32
3.4.1 Impactful faith actors recognise themselves as part of civil society	32
3.4.2 Impactful faith actors are informed	33
3.4.3 Impactful faith actors are guided by their core religious principles	34
3.4.4 Impactful faith actors play to their strengths	35
3.4.5 Impactful faith actors make faith spaces into spaces for civic engagement	36
3.5 Learning how to work with faith actors to strengthen civic space	37
3.5.1 Accept that faith actors are a heterogenous group	37
3.5.2 Be realistic in expectations of faith actors	39
3.5.3 Positioning and attitude when engaging with faith actors	41
4. Conclusion	42

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**Disclaimer:** This study relies primarily on a series of interviews with global or regional experts active within civic space, conducted by an independent research consultant. The opinions and positions of interviewees, or captured in literature and examples, are not necessarily those of DCA, but all serve to illustrate the discussion.

## Suggested reference

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## 'What is the role of faith actors, amidst a rapidly shrinking civic space?'

This study started with this question. It began with the recognition that faith actors, with their influence, and grounding within communities, play a critical role in pushing back against the rise of global repression.

Their role has often been nuanced and has taken on diverse forms. Global news is awash with faith actors operating with impunity and being complicit to State repression. Less heard of are faith actors operating in the background to build communities, strengthen participation, and to protect civil society when they face threats and intimidation.

This study is the result of conversations with faith actors, civil society representatives and duty-bearers, aimed towards understanding how faith actors have utilised their roles for and against civic space. It touches on what faith actors can achieve when the principles of human rights and civic space are rooted within their own values.

It aims to find those spaces of strategic engagement, where both faith actors and secular actors – which may be rooted in diverse value systems – learn from one another and work together to push back against the shrinking of civic space.

## A shrinking civic space impacts all of civil society, including faith actors

A global downturn in democracy in recent decades has affected not just political life, but the ability of every individual to speak up and be part of a community. Individuals interviewed in the study have attributed this shrinking space to different factors, such as the eroding of institutions, the rise of authoritarian leaders, increased polarisation of views, and the closing of space for the media.

This shrinking of civic space touches on multiple facets of faith actors' work, particularly work on building communities. Historically, faith actors have provided spaces for discussion and activism during times of political or social crises, such as during Brazil's dictatorship.

They also provide havens for their constituents, who are often the most marginalised – such as for victims of State-sponsored violence such as in Nicaragua or the Philippines.

Faith actors face the impact of this shrinking of space, through reprisals for pushing back against authoritarian governments, or through efforts to stifle their ability to practice their religious beliefs. This intimidation and harassment can discourage further participation in advocacy – it also impacts their ability to do their mandate, whether that is through speaking truth to power and holding duty bearers to account, service delivery or connecting with their communities. Engaging faith actors must involve a recognition of these concrete challenges and supporting them to overcome these.

Photo: Simon Chambers/ACT



## Strategies from faith actors provide inspiration to other faith communities on working within repressive contexts

Faith actors who are effective in civic space work do this through utilising their influence and grounding their work within their own value systems. Faith actors have used the following strategies:

- Utilising opportunities and spaces of engagement with political leaders and policymakers to lobby for civic space,
- Using their platform and reach to draw public attention to where CSOs are being persecuted,
- Acting as mediators between civil society actors and political leaders when there is an absence of trust,
- Using different strategies of diplomacy to improve the conditions for civil society actors,
- Utilising their local, regional, national, and international religious/faith-based networks to draw attention to where civic space and CSOs are under threat.

Faith actors in many contexts have been key allies of civil society, human rights defenders and marginalised communities. The study highlights what is possible when faith actors use their existing platforms for civic space, or when they support the protection of threatened civil society actors.

## Engagement with faith actors must recognise the diversity of their roles

Faith actors are a diverse group, with different belief systems and perspectives. Further, their diverse operating environments can affect how they respond to pressing issues. As diverse as their identities are, the roles they play and how they interact with other faith communities and with secular actors need to be informed by a commitment to human dignity and justice.

The study calls for an engagement that recognises this diversity, and roots civic space within value systems that recognise inclusion and participation for faith actors. Drawing from their own value systems, faith actors can bring the concepts of inclusion, social justice and care for the other on the table. Engagement, when possible, can also entail complex conversations, as well as open new discourses or opportunities for joint work.

Faith actors form a key part of civil society – with critical roles to play not least within grassroots communities. Working with them requires mutual respect and openness, a recognition of their diversity and of the strengths they bring.

As ruthless and authoritarian actors further polarise groups from one another – a wider community of faith and secular actors, built on a shared vision, has the potential to play a key role in promoting, protecting, and safeguarding civic space.



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## Executive summary

### Background

DanChurchAid (DCA) is a Danish humanitarian, not-for-profit non-governmental organisation based in Copenhagen. It recognises the role of faith actors in driving change and is committed to engaging with faith-based actors in developing and defending civic space. Globally, civic space is shrinking. This is why DCA commissioned this research piece, with the aim of supporting faith actors' engagement in promoting the civic space and responding to attempts to limit it.

The research used a qualitative, inductive approach. Four methods were used: review of DCA documentation; a rapid literature review; case study compilation; and key informant interviews. A purposive sampling approach was used in the selection of KII participants, all experts active within global and/or regional civic space. International ethical clearance for the study was received from Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

### Findings

Participants agreed that, globally, civic space is shrinking. Yet they were quick to emphasise that it depends on the country context: in some countries civic space is shrinking, while in others it is growing. Participants' reflections on why civic space is shrinking highlighted that there is no single or simple driver of the phenomenon. Drivers include: the global rise of authoritarian leaders that promote exclusive, polarising views; government actors that wish to shut down dissident voices; deliberate strategies to make it hard for civil society organisations (CSOs) to register and function legally; a reduction in global support for civic space and CSOs; the changing nature and role of media; backlash to the human rights gains made in the past; and civil society itself.

Faith actors are not passively accepting the challenge to civil society and civic space. Interview participants offered and discussed multiple examples of faith actors that are working to promote and strengthen civic space. Faith actors do so by mobilising around a specific civic issue or topic (e.g., women's rights or freedom of speech), but also, through their unique positioning as faith actors, by mobilising to strengthen and protect civic space and civil society actors generally. Faith actors also work to facilitate and develop civic awareness and knowledge, creating spaces for discussions and learning about civic issues and the importance of civic mobilisation. Key to these different ways of mobilising to strengthen civic space, are core religious principles that drive and guide faith actors' civic participation.

Unfortunately, the reality is that some faith actors are contributing to the shrinking of civic space. Faith actors contribute to shrinking civic space by staying silent when injustice occurs, by aligning with repressive politicians and governments, by promoting policies that are detrimental to civic space and civil society actors, and by attacking other civil society actors. Various reasons were discussed for why some faith actors choose to act in these ways.

Promising practices have emerged and lessons learnt from faith actors contributing to civic space, as captured in interview participants' reflections, review of DCA documentation, as well as literature review. Five key practices have been identified as being implemented by faith actors that are making a positive impact on strengthening civic space. Impactful faith actors recognise themselves as part of civil society, are informed, are guided by their core religious principles, play to their strengths, and make faith spaces into spaces for civic engagement.

Finally, guidance is offered to non-faith actors (both within and outside of civil society) that wish to engage with faith actors in strengthening civic space. Such actors are advised to accept that faith actors are a heterogeneous group, to be realistic in their expectations of faith actors, to build faith literacy and to be intentional about their positioning and attitude when engaging with faith actors.

### Conclusion

The reduction or repression of civic space is a global phenomenon, driven by various factors, and impacting the rights and freedoms of many people, especially marginalised, minority groups. Faith actors are, can and should be playing a role in civic space, drawing on their unique positioning and motivation to help promote the rights of all. Especially by having the "values that are needed" (Participant #3, 2023), faith actors' core religious values arguably offer them unique motivation and direction for their civic engagement. This should be embraced in engaging with faith actors to support civic space.





Photo: Tom Schneider/DCA

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Restrictions on civic space prevent civil society actors from engaging in policy formulation, monitoring rights, raising awareness, championing the voices of vulnerable populations, and from building partnerships. It thus effectively stifles the realisation of the UN Agenda 2030 SDG 16 and its target of ensuring “responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.”<sup>1</sup>

Faith<sup>2</sup> actors are part of civil society, but their roles in civic space and in the shrinking of civic space is ambiguous. Many examples across the globe, and throughout history, can be found of faith actors working to build and protect civic space. Yet many examples also exist of faith actors playing a role in enabling rights violations and repressing civic space.

DanChurchAid (DCA) is a Danish humanitarian, faith-based, not-for-profit non-governmental organisation based in Copenhagen, with country offices in 19 of the poorest and most vulnerable countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.<sup>3</sup> DCA has 195 professional local partners and 138 sister agencies. In its new Global Strategy, DCA, the organisation recognises the role of faith actors in driving change and DCA commits to engaging with faith-based actors in developing and defending civic space. This commitment was the impetus behind this research piece and its objectives.

## 1.2 Objective of the research

The objective of this research, as commissioned by DCA, is to support faith actors' engagement in promoting the civic space and responding to attempts to limit it. Therefore, the research focused on:

- Documenting the contribution, best practices and recommendations on faith actors' promotion of civic space across regions globally and in different faith communities
- Reflecting on the role of faith actors in repressing civic space, limiting the access and reach of other civil society actors, and silencing and excluding civil society organisations.
- Demonstrating the achievable results to hesitant faith actors, colleagues in DCA and other organisations and donors.

It should be noted that the aim of the research is to focus on how civic space *in general* is supported/repressed *in general*. The focus is on mobilisation for/against civic space and civil society actors in general, rather than in relation to a specific issue (e.g., gender equality). At the same time there is, however, recognition that the specific issues do play a role around how civic space is supported/repressed (e.g., the difference between CSOs efforts around gender equality is responded to, versus CSO efforts around food security).

Based on the study objectives, the following three broad research questions guided the research:

- What roles do faith actors play in developing and defending civic space for all civil society actors?
- In what ways do faith actors enable the repression of civic space and certain civil society actors?
- Which practices are recommended for faith actors to adopt in order to develop and defend civic space for all?

## 1.3 Methodology

The research used a qualitative, inductive approach. A qualitative approach was suitable, as it allows the researcher to investigate issues that require explanation or understanding of phenomena in specific contexts. An inductive and interpretivist approach was appropriate, as it enables the researcher to listen to faith actor and civil society voices in order to better understand the complexities surrounding faith actor engagement in civic space. Four methods were used: review of DCA documentation; a rapid literature review; case study compilation; and key informant interviews.

In terms of DCA document review, relevant DCA reports from Uganda and Zimbabwe, and from regional consultations in Eastern Africa and in Denmark, was reviewed by the research consultant. A rapid literature review was conducted by DCA colleagues, with direction and support from the research consultant. The rapid literature review focused on reviewing and synthesising key pieces of existing evidence specifically on: why civic space is shrinking; the documented role that faith actors have played in promoting and supporting civic space, as well as their role in the repression of civic space and civil society actors; a brief reflection on the normative narratives from various religious traditions that call on

1 UN (n.d.). [Targets and Indicators](#). Accessed October 28, 2023.

2 The terms ‘faith’ and ‘religion’ are used interchangeably in this report.

3 DANChurchAid (2020). [DanChurchAid](#). Accessed December 4, 2023.

faith actors to engage in and support the civic space; and general recommendations on strengthening the civic space. DCA colleagues also took responsibility for writing up four case studies showcasing faith actor involvement in civic space. Empirical data collection was done by the research consultant, in the form of ten virtual key informant interviews (KIIs).

A purposive sampling approach was used in the selection of KII participants. DCA was asked to identify a list of 10 potential research participants that meet the following certain criteria on diversity: the 10 KII participants must be active within the global, or at least regional, civic space; be working within different SDG focus areas; represent different regions of the world; ensure gender diversity; belong to different religions and/or be working with faith actors from different religions; include faith actors, civil society actors that engage with faith actors, and policymakers that engage with faith actors; be knowledgeable about the reality of the shrinking civil space; and have a role that requires collaborating with others and working collaboratively to achieve goals.

The final KII participants were selected in consultation with the research consultant. However, with one interview, two participants from the same organisations elected to take part in the session, therefore there were a total of eleven KII participants in the ten KIIs. Participants were granted full anonymity and confidentiality, to enable them to speak freely. Therefore, neither the names of participants, nor the organisations they work for, are shared in this study. All quotes are labeled only with a number (e.g., "Participant #7).

A brief overview of the 11 participants are offered here:

- 8 work for national or international faith-based organisations; two work for (secular) INGOs; and one works for a government ministry
- 7 have roles that require them to engage on regional or global level; 4 have roles that require them to focus on one country context.
- 8 men and 3 women participated.

All KIIs were conducted on MS Teams, audio-recorded and transcribed using the automatic transcription function of MS Teams. The fieldnotes taken by the consultant researcher were thematically analysed in Atlas.ti, using a hybrid inductive and deductive approach. Two rounds of coding were conducted.

International ethical clearance for this research project was received from the Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee: Humanities (member of the South African National Health Research Ethics Committee, NHREC, registration REC-050411-032). The study was conducted in a way that observes international standards for ethical research. This included:

All participants voluntarily took part in the study and were aware that they have the right to refuse to answer and could withdraw from participation at any time

While DCA approached potential participants, the consultant researcher independently engaged with all participants who agreed to take part, to confirm their willingness to take part, explain the anonymity and confidentiality that is provided, and to share the consent form and Teams invitation link

- Full anonymity of participants and confidentiality of the information shared was observed at all times, including in reporting
- Consent forms were signed by all participants prior to partaking in research activities
- A draft version of the report was shared with all participants, for review and feedback
- Data was protected from unauthorised access at all times, by saving it on a password-protected computer.

This study does have limitations. It is a small study that only engaged with a small number of people. It therefore offers only a partial view of how faith actors function and impact the civic space, particularly the reality of shrinking civic space. The sampling strategy, where there is intentional engagement with different kinds of actors who are active globally and represent diversity on many levels, was a way to mitigate this limitation.

## 1.4 Structure of the report

This introduction is followed by a short literature review, offering a rapid overview of civic space, faith actors, and faith actors' role in civic space. This is followed by Section 3, which shares the findings of the key informant interviews. Both Section 2 and 3 contain stand-alone text boxes, where specific case studies are shared, as and when is relevant to what is being discussed. Section 4 concludes the report.



## 2. Literature review

A rapid literature review was conducted, with the aim of reviewing and synthesising key pieces of existing evidence specifically on why civic space is shrinking, the role of faith actors in civic space, the normative narratives from various religious traditions that call on faith actors to engage in civic space, and general recommendations on strengthening civic space.

### 2.1 What is civic space?

The UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner defines civic space as “the environment that enables civil society to play a role in the political, economic and social life of our societies.”<sup>4</sup> Civic space ensures both individuals and groups the rights to freedom of expression and opinion, as well as freedom of assembly and association, which is a prerequisite for making development and peace sustainable. Civic space also creates conditions, including international and legal policies, that enable and support the exercise of these rights, and allow individuals and groups to participate in the political, economic and/or social decisions that affect their lives.<sup>5</sup>



Photo: Bax Lindhardt/DCA

<sup>4</sup> UN OHCHR (2023). [OHCHR and protecting and expanding civic space](#). Accessed October 16, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> UN OHCHR (2020). [UN Guidance Note.pdf \(ohchr.org\)](#). Accessed October 16, 2023.

## 2.2 Is civic space shrinking?

Civic space in recent decades has narrowed and shrunk across the globe. A 2022 report by CIVICUS, a global alliance of CSOs and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society globally, revealed that 117 out of the 197 countries and territories monitored by CIVICUS faced severe restrictions on civic space.<sup>6</sup> As of last year, more than two billion people are estimated to be living in places with a 'closed' civic space, where they are subject to the worst forms of violations of fundamental freedoms. In 2022, the most prevalent violations of civic space were the use of harassment, the arbitrary detention of protesters, and the use of intimidation. Women, people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)<sup>7</sup>, labour unions, environmental defenders and youth were the most affected groups.

These restrictions have compromised the ability of civil society organisations to operate. A joint research by ACT Alliance and CIDSE showed that, increasingly, civil society organisations' work is being conducted in a 'climate of fear'. New laws to restrict civic space contribute towards stifling the work of CSOs.<sup>8</sup> While the ability to operate and advocate for human rights is influenced by regime types and state capacity, these measures curtailing civic space also impact CSOs operating in democratic countries.<sup>9</sup>

Several reasons are posited for why civic space is shrinking and closing. CIVICUS highlights the decline of democratic values and the emergence of leaders who do not tolerate dissent and enact repressive legislation. Recent research has shown an increase (since 2012) in the number of autocratic countries, with 40 countries identified as becoming more autocratic in 2022, and the number of people enjoying democratic rights decreasing between 2016 and 2022, from 3.9 billion to 2.3 billion.<sup>10</sup> Authoritarian leaders and undemocratic movements often gather support by exploiting people's fears of social or economic insecurity, as commentators deemed to be the case with Donald Trump in the United States of America, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, and Modi in India. In conflict-filled or fragile settings, or in times of economic uncertainty, these leaders present themselves as the way to find national stability and personal safety.<sup>11</sup>

Conflict and other forms of political instability in any case threaten and usually degrade democratic institutions and the rule of law. Any such situations that threaten national security or the public may necessitate the suspension of civil liberties, e.g., implementation of martial law.<sup>12</sup> This was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, where governments across the globe implemented emergency measures to limit the spread of the pandemic. Many governments, however, have used such measures as a pretext to curtail dissent and to evade accountability for violations.<sup>13</sup>

Social and economic inequities also contribute to the closing of civic space. Currently, 1% of the world population holds 44.5 % of world's wealth.<sup>14</sup> The concentration of wealth and power with certain privileged groups often leads to the exclusion of sectors of the population from participation in decision-making. These privileged groups can also discredit civil society actors that try to expose corruption or seek accountability for inequalities.

Threats to civic space also come from the online world. While emerging information and communication technologies help civil society networks to grow and communicate across borders, they also enable governments to monitor civil society movements and activities, and control or limit media freedoms under the pretext of security concerns.<sup>15</sup> Civil society actors are also harassed, threatened and persecuted online. For example, woman human rights defenders that challenge societal norms are subject to frequent online attacks, including sexist hate speech, defamation and reputational attacks, privacy violations or censorship. In some settings, even certain civil society groups are guilty of subjecting these activists to such treatment, as a recent study by DCA found.<sup>16</sup>

6 CIVICUS (2022). [People Power Under Attack 2022: A report based on data from CIVICUS Monitor](#). Accessed October 16, 2023.

7 The acronym will be used throughout the report to refer to those with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, except when a participant is quoted who used a different acronym (e.g. LGBTI).

8 ACT Alliance & CIDSE (2014). [Space for Civil Society: How to protect and expand an enabling environment](#). Accessed January 2024.

9 ACT Alliance (2011) [Shrinking political space of civil society action](#). Accessed January 2024.

10 Bastian H., E- Ortiz-Ospina and M. Roser (2013). [Democracy. OurWorldInData.org](#). Accessed October 17, 2023.

11 Kakkar, H. and N. Sivanathan (2017). [When the appeal of a dominant leader is greater than a prestige leader](#). PNAS. 114 (26) 6734-6739. Accessed October 17, 2023.

12 CIVICUS World Alliance (2021). [What is civic space and why is it shrinking?](#) - YouTube Accessed October 17, 2023.

13 Amnesty International (2020). [COVID-19 crackdowns: Police abuse and the global pandemic](#). Accessed October 17, 2023.

14 UBS (2023). [Global Wealth Report 2023](#). Accessed October 17, 2023.

15 UN OHCHR (2023). [OHCHR and protecting and expanding civic space](#). Accessed October 17, 2023.

16 Dan Church Aid (DCA) (2023). [Report: 'Online Harassment and Censorship of Women Human Rights Defenders'](#). Act Alliance. Accessed October 18, 2023.



## 2.3 What are faith actors?

The term ‘faith actor’ is an umbrella term “covering faith-based organisations (FBOs), religious networks, church-based agencies, religious groups, religious associations and charities, interfaith networks, council, missionary organisations, religious community organisations and religious leaders.”<sup>17</sup> Faith actors exert considerable influence in their communities and in the wider social and political life. This role has been recognised by governments, civil society and regional and national institutions, who have engaged them around various development and humanitarian issues. For example, in 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees published a partnership guideline which set out guidelines for working with faith actors, recognising their roles in responding in humanitarian settings.<sup>18</sup>

Faith actors’ roles in pursuing globally-agreed goals and priorities have been recognised. For example, faith actors have been documented as contributing towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG2 (No Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 7 (Renewable Energy), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 16 (Peace and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals).<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, it is also important to highlight that religious actors can substantially hamper and obstruct progress of the globally agreed goals. For instance, faith actors have impeded people’s movements for democracy and the advancement of (gender) equality,<sup>20 21</sup> while some have been accused of perpetuating human rights abuses, and of complicity to grave atrocities.<sup>22</sup> Faith actors’ roles in achieving the SDGs, as well as other globally-agreed goals and priorities, is therefore somewhat ambiguous.



Photo: ACT

17 Le Roux, E. (2021). [Religion and gender in donor policies and practice. A reflection on government ministry and intergovernmental agency engagement with religious actors in pursuit of SDG 5. Research report: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities.](#) Accessed October 17, 2023.

18 UNHCR (2014). [Partnership Note on Faith-based Organizations, Local Faith Communities and Faith Leaders.](#) Accessed October 17, 2023.

19 Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality and UNEP (2020). [Faith action on the UN Sustainable Development Goals: progress and outlook.](#) New York, 26p. Accessed October 17, 2023.

20 Le Roux, E. (2021). [Religion and gender in donor policies and practice. A reflection on government ministry and intergovernmental agency engagement with religious actors in pursuit of SDG 5.](#) Research report: Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities. Accessed October 17, 2023.

21 Khalaf-Elledge, N. (2020). “It’s a tricky one” – development practitioners’ attitudes towards religion. *Development in Practice*, 30(5): 660-671.

22 Jerryson, M. (2017). *Buddhist Inspired Genocide.* Accessed October 17, 2023.

## 2.4 What are the roles of faith actors in civic space?

As within development and humanitarian settings, the role of faith actors in the enabling of civic space has been diverse and falls within a wide spectrum. Historically, faith and religion have been utilised towards the pursuit of colonisation, and the subjugation of native populations across the world.<sup>23</sup> This has allowed for lasting legacies of discrimination and exclusion of indigenous peoples and marginalized groups, embedded in institutions and governance frameworks that reinforce inequities. For example, colonial-era laws and policies on aspects related to sedition, blasphemy and curtailment of expression, continue to be used against activists, opposition groups, and critical media.

Yet, faith actors have also historically played the complete opposite role in colonial empires, by advocating for culturally marginalised indigenous communities and their rights. For example, Christian missionaries advocated for Karens in Myanmar<sup>24 25</sup> and for the creation of social spaces for the untouchable caste of Dalits in India.<sup>26 27</sup> Much evidence exists of the role of faith actors as drivers of change within human rights and civic space, where faith actors across the globe have supported emerging social and activist movements.<sup>28</sup> In repressed communities where dissent against the state carries the threat of reprisals, faith leaders have used their positions to criticise government actions or advocate for the freedoms of oppressed groups.

In Nicaragua, faith actors joined the human rights community in denouncing the country's dictatorship, even though this led to faith actors facing similar reprisals as the human rights community. Catholic churches in the country also became places of refuge for individuals and actors to speak out against the government.<sup>29</sup> In the Philippines, faith actors were instrumental in the campaign against the government's war on drugs, where suspected drug users were killed without due process, and critics and activists were attacked by state actors. As with Nicaragua, churches in the Philippines became places of sanctuary for victims and their relatives.<sup>30</sup>

In Brazil, small Christian communities and prayer groups centred on principles of awareness of oppression and action against such oppression, influenced the development of civil society and offered spaces for discussion and interaction among human rights activists during Brazil's dictatorship.<sup>31</sup> In East Germany, Protestant churches served as safe havens and incubators for civic protest and action against the regime until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

However, examples of faith actors oppressing civic space are also available. In Turkey, faith actors' alignment with the government's strong stance against the Gezi Park protestors in Istanbul in 2013 stirred debates around such impacts on civic space.<sup>32</sup> During these protests, there were reports of excessive use of force by the police, arrests of demonstrators, and restrictions on freedom of expression, with subsequent prosecution of those that participated.<sup>33</sup> Concerns around the reinforcement of suppressive policies and of dissent during times of political and social unrest point out to the complex relationship between faith and civic space.

23 Tomalin, E., J. Haustein & S.Kidy. (2019). [Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals](#), The Review of Faith & International Affairs, 17(2): 102-118. Accessed October 17, 2023.

24 Rajah, A. (2002) [A 'nation of intent' in Burma: Karen ethno-nationalism, nationalism and narrations of nation](#), The Pacific Review, 15:4, 517-537, DOI: 10.1080/0951274021000029413. Accessed October 17, 2023

25 Horstmann, A. (2011). [Ethical Dilemmas and Identifications of Faith-Based Humanitarian Organizations in the Karen Refugee Crisis](#), *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24(3): 513–532. Accessed October 17, 2023.

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27 Gupta, C. (2015). Embodying Resistance: Representing Dalits in Colonial India, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 38(1), 100-118, DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2014.987193. Accessed October 17, 2023.

28 Moksnes, H. & Melin, M. (2013). [Faith Actors in Civil Society as Drivers of Change](#). Uppsala Center for Sustainable Development. ISSN 1403-1264. Accessed October 17, 2023.

29 Bermúdez, A. F., A. Kurmanaev and Y. Mendoza (2022). [Nicaragua silences its last outspoken critics: Catholic Priests](#). New York Times. Accessed October 18, 2023

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31 Keck, M. (1992). [The Workers' Party and Democratization in Brazil](#). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Accessed October 18, 2023.

32 Yilmaz I., Demir M., Morieson N, (2021). [Religion in Creating Populist Appeal: Islamist Populism and Civilizationism in the Friday Sermons of Turkey's Diyanet](#). *Religions* 2021, 12(5), 359. Accessed October 17, 2023.

33 Amnesty International (2013). [Turkey accused of gross human rights violations in Gezi Park protests](#). Accessed October 17, 2023

## 2.5 How is shrinking civic space uniquely affecting faith actors?

Freedom of Religion or Belief is emerging as a civil liberty that is severely impacted by the shrinking of civic space, impacting especially marginalised minority groups of faith and of no faith.<sup>34 35 36</sup> A comprehensive global examination that included 771 distinct religious minorities across 183 sovereign states, revealed the multifaceted nature of discriminatory practices targeting these groups.<sup>37</sup> It include intimidation, mobilisation against religious adherents, coerced religious conversions, and the suppression of minority voices. Moreover, individuals belonging to religious minorities and those who advocate for diverse faith perspectives often find themselves subjected to legal sanctions and judicial proceedings, frequently under the purview of blasphemy laws.

### The intersections of authoritarianism and religion on India's civic space

Religion has been critical in defining India's own brand of authoritarianism, which has led to a diminished civic space that disproportionately impacts religious minorities. Despite the establishment of a constitution that emphasised a 'principled distance' between the government and religion, political parties and leaders have invoked religious sentiments for political interests and to pass policies detrimental to human rights.<sup>38</sup> This has contributed to the emergence of a Hindu nationalist ideology, which defines the country's identity as inseparable from the religion of Hinduism. Hindutva, its most prominent form, has been associated with violence against religious minorities.

Since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 2014, it has passed policies that have constricted the civic space for religious minorities, particularly Muslims, but also the Sikh and Christian populations. In 2019, following its re-election, the government revoked the special autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir, a territory with a Muslim majority. It also passed a citizenship law which made religion a criterion for citizenship, which fast-tracks Indian citizenship for non-Muslim minorities, and threatens the legal status of Muslims.

These policies have spurred and enabled direct attacks by both security forces and extremist groups against the Muslim population, while also constricting their space to speak out against these policies. Human Rights Watch has documented the use of violence and attacks against fundamental freedoms by the police against Muslims, which have included beatings, torture and the suppression of peaceful protests.<sup>39</sup> Extremist mobs have spurred communal violence which has led to the deaths of civilians and the destruction of property. Amidst this, the government has failed to condemn such acts, and has often accused Muslims of inciting violence or conspiring against the country.

34 The Association of Religion Data Archives (the ARDA) (2023). [World Religion](#). Accessed October 17, 2023

35 Majumdar, S. (2021). [Key findings about restrictions on religion around the world in 2019](#). Pew Research Centre. Accessed October 17, 2023

36 Hurriyah (2022). [Asserting civic space of micro religious minorities: Evidence from Indonesia](#). Asian Policy & Politics, 15: 185-204. Accessed October 17, 2023.

37 Fox, J. (2020). [Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods before Me: Why Governments Discriminate against Religious Minorities](#). Cambridge University Press. New York. 294p., ISBN: 9781108488914. Accessed October 18, 2023.

38 Ellis-Petersen, H. (2022). [What is Hindu nationalism and who are the RSS?](#) The Guardian. Accessed October 17, 2023.

39 Human Rights Watch. (2021). [India: Government policies, actions target minorities](#). Accessed October 17, 2023.

### 3. Findings

At the heart of this study lie ten key informant interviews, conducted with individuals active within global and/or regional civic space. They are all recognised experts in their respective fields. The study in this way prioritised learning from them about civic space and the role of faith actors. This section captures the key findings that emerged from the interviews, based on the analysis conducted by the research consultant. The text boxes contain case studies and examples sourced through literature review.

#### 3.1 Civic space under threat

Of the ten participants interviewed in this study, all but one agreed that, globally, civic space is shrinking. Yet they were quick to emphasise that it depends on the country context: in some countries civic space is shrinking, while in others it is growing. They also emphasised that it is not a linear process, whereby civil society gradually changes from strong and dynamic to repressed and absent. The nature and development of civic space is a complex phenomenon, dependent on setting and contextual factors. Nevertheless, the tendency globally is for civic space to shrink.

*The relationship (is changing) between civic space and the public space and the role of several stakeholders, like governments, churches and politicians. I think that it's modifying over the years, but with the intention of taking the role of civil society organisations out of the equation. (Participant #9, 2023)*

The one participant that did not experience civic space as shrinking was reflecting on the issue from their very country-specific circumstances of fragility and humanitarian intervention, and attested to a vibrant civil society that was working actively to respond to the needs of the populace. This participant's opinions on why civic space is strong and growing echoed what other participants shared when they reflected on why civic space is growing in certain settings. Three reasons for the growth of civic space were discussed. First, a general populace that takes responsibility for what is happening in their country and know what they need to do to make a difference, helps strengthen civic space. Second, a younger generation that is actively pushing back against the status quo strengthens civil society. Third, increased opportunities and avenues for communication due to improving technology, means civil society actors can support each other across borders. With this increase in solidarity, civic space grows.

Participants' reflections on why civic space is shrinking highlighted that there is no single or simple driver of the phenomenon. Rather, different sectors are (directly and indirectly) limiting CSOs and civic organising. First, the global rise of a particular kind of political leadership is a significant challenge to civic space. Across the globe, political leaders and parties are emerging that rely on polarisation, fear of 'the other', and policies that promote exclusion, in order to attain and retain positions of power. Participants emphasised that these kinds of leaders are emerging across the globe:

*What is globally taking place... is the legitimisation of the populist leaders with the right-wing kind of thinking. Whether it is in Russia or it is in Germany or it is in Italy or France or in the US... India is an excellent example for that... (He) was manipulating the religious, the ethnic, the cultural identity of people in the same country in order to justify policies of exclusion and dismisses democratic procedure or democratic systems and mechanisms. (Participant #5, 2023)*

*Such authoritarian leaders also tend to support authoritarian leaders in other countries, including financially, as it helps promote their own interests and agendas, and this has contributed to an increase in the kind of leadership that threatens civic space. Participants see this as a global challenge to the democratic order, with a move away from inclusive democracy to more authoritarian models. This increase in authoritarian political structures threatens civic space and continues to happen in part due to certain powerful countries promoting authoritarianism, but also due to a conservative cultural revolution that is happening in some countries, as one participant explained: "(U)sually the Western inclusive democracy model is... seen as a driver of a lot of cultural changes that are in opposition to the culture existing in the country that moves towards a more authoritarian model" (Participant #10, 2023).*



Within this leadership climate there is also what one participant called “the confluence of fundamentalisms” (Participant #9, 2023). In many countries, religious, economic and political fundamentalisms are receiving increasing support. It threatens civic space when these fundamentalist leaders team up in order to achieve their individual goals. For example, a conservative political leader will support the anti-abortion agenda of fundamentalist Christian groups, in order to gain their support for his own anti-immigration agenda. By teaming up in this way, they are able to promote their individual fundamentalist agendas, and move and legislate against civil society and civic rights in powerful ways. One participant explained how this happens in Brazil:

*For instance, in Brazil, the churches... have a big number of Members of the Parliament and they are working together, and that is bringing different... denominations together. Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals promoting ‘family values’ mainly. But they do that (by) exchanging favours with the economic sector, and also with the political (actors)... Because in Brazil... if you are connected with the religious leaders, you have a big chance to be elected because (they use the pulpit to encourage people to vote for a specific political leader)... And then (the political actors) legislate against... for instance, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and against the rights of LGBTQI communities in Brazil.*  
(Participant #9, 2023)

At least partly due to the political leadership that is emerging, a global political climate of polarisation has also grown. In this climate, the emphasis is on identifying and supporting a certain group, while excluding and vilifying others. Participants explained that this kind of political climate is not conducive to civil society, as civic space is threatened when the rights and freedoms of minority groups are not respected. But polarisation is an effective way for political leaders to find and retain support:

*Now, if there is a Muslim praying in a mosque or in a community center in Paris, in Sweden or whatever the country is, (now people are aware of it). And this awareness of differences and the different ways of a practicing life and identity, lends itself to politician to say ‘you know you’re under threat, you’re under attack. And let me protect you.’*  
(Participant #5, 2023)



Photo: Adelcio Kronbauer /ACT/FLD

However, civic space is not only shrinking due to a particular kind of political leadership. Civic actors are also deliberately targeted, limited and persecuted by government actors that wish to have or hold on to power. In such settings, civil society actors are seen as a threat to the power of those in (political) power: “Where civic space is shrinking, generally we have people in power who try to hold on to power. For to hold on to power, you have to limit the space for dissent” (Participant #4, 2023). Civil society creates space for alternative opinions and voices, which those in power are not comfortable with and therefore may go to great lengths to silence such voices and close down civic space. As one participant explained their experiences in their specific country, the state perceives civil society as “regime change agents” (Participant #7, 2023), and therefore respond to this perceived challenge to power by instituting legislation that limits freedom of expression, assembly and information.

CSOs are targeted in multiple ways. One way in which government actors limit and shrink civic space, is by making it very hard for CSOs to operate. Through official requirements and legislation they make it difficult for CSOs to register and function legally within the country. One participant explained the experiences of their organisation and its member organisations:

*(T)he government's produced laws and regulations that make it difficult to register as civil society organisations. And also there are legal framework restrictions on activities... We have members in... (other countries who) are subjected to bureaucratic reporting and audit requirements that are increasing every day... (T)he work of civil society organisations (are) obstructed because of the costs that they put for registrations, permits, visas and a lot of tax requirements as well.* (Participant #9, 2023)

CSOs are monitored to ensure that they abide by the legislation and requirements. If they do not do so, it offers easy grounds for government actors to shut them down. CSOs are also monitored to ensure that they do not engage on issues outside of their government-registered mandate. This makes it challenging for many CSOs to respond and adapt to the needs that emerge as they are implementing their programming. In some countries, the government restricts CSOs' access to funding, for example by having restrictions on their ability to open bank accounts, or to transfer or receive funds.

*Any opportunity may be used to limit or persecute civil society. One such situation was COVID-19, where certain governments used the pandemic as justification for limiting the activities of CSOs. These limitations in many settings still continue, as the precedent was set during the pandemic. For example, movement and gathering restrictions during COVID-19 were used to prevent CSOs working for climate justice from implementing their activities. But the restrictions on these CSOs still continue, despite other COVID-19 restrictions having lifted. Where the government fears or mistrusts civil society, any actions that are seen as a threat to state power and positioning is labelled in such a way as to justify persecution. For example, mobilising for climate justice is defined as terrorism, with civic actors then persecuted and prosecuted: “Here in my country, if a group starts talking about climate justice, then you are labelled as terrorist” (Participant #1, 2023).*

It should be noted that a number of participants highlighted that, in many contexts, the government does not limit all civil society activities. For example, it may be fine with civil society actors being active on food security or health. However, those civic actors that mobilise around issues that are perceived as threatening to state power and agendas, e.g., governance and peace, or climate justice, are persecuted.

*If you do your analysis correctly, you realise that the state appears to not have a problem with the people into development work, people into livelihoods. But most organisations that are into governance, organisations that are into peace, organisations that are into the transformative issues are the hard hit. So those are the people that appear to have a shrinkage of space.* (Participant #7, 2023)

A number of participants also believe that civic space is shrinking due to a lack of state support globally for civil society. It used to be that civil society actors that were being neglected or repressed by their governments, would receive support from other governments. However, many of the countries that used to support the development of civic space and the activities of CSOs in other countries, now choose to solely focus on other matters, e.g., humanitarian aid or securitization. According to the participants interviewed, there appears to be less of an interest in, support for and prioritisation of civil society actors, and decreasing funding for CSOs:

*If you see the humanitarian work, for instance, most of the money that is given by the governments are for the UN, not for the services... (T)hey are talking about the localisation agenda, the role of local organisations, local leadership, but in practice, that is not happening.* (Participant #9, 2023)

A number of other drivers of shrinking civic space were also identified, but discussed to a lesser extent. First, a crisis in the nature and role of media was identified as playing a role in shrinking civic space. How social media is used leads to multiple narratives emerging, with people struggling to know what to believe. It also gives a platform to those who do not have knowledge or insight on an issue, yet carelessly make statements and denouncements. Independent media often cannot survive, which means there are no independent watch dogs holding those in power to account: “Lots of independent media cannot sustain themselves... because of new technologies and so forth... Many newspapers are shutting down, (namely) those who are not either funded by the state or large corporations” (Participant #4, 2023).

The shrinking civic space is also, according to some participants, at least partly due to backlash to human rights gains that have been made in the recent past. In reaction to certain marginalised groups (e.g., women) attaining their rights, certain actors actively try to repress the CSOs and civic space that promote and ensure these rights.

*I see the shrinking civic space as a reaction to some of the gains we've had in the past decades, in terms of the expansion of the international human rights framework and the expansion of access to certain rights in certain countries. (P)articularly the shift of some marginalised groups that were previously marginalised... So I do see this (shrinking of civic space) as a reaction. (Participant #2.1, 2023)*

Civil society itself was also identified by some of the participants as being part of the problem. In some countries, civil society is divided, aligning with different political actors or factions. In some settings, CSOs do not act on the opportunities that are presented, e.g., they do not attend if they are invited to round table discussions with government actors. Finally, some CSOs do not abide by the legislation and requirements imposed on them, which leads to them being shut down.



Photo: Jimmy Obuya/Christian Aid





Photo: Mikkel Østergaard/DCA



### 3.2 Faith actors contributing to strengthening civic space

Faith actors are not passively accepting the challenge to civil society and civic space. Interview participants offered and discussed multiple examples of faith actors that are working to promote and strengthen civic space. Faith actors do so by mobilising around a specific civic issue or topic (e.g., women's rights or freedom of speech), but also, through their unique positioning as faith actors, by mobilising to strengthen and protect civic space and civil society actors generally. Faith actors also work to facilitate and develop civic awareness and knowledge, creating spaces for discussions and learning about civic issues and the importance of civic mobilisation. Key to these different ways of mobilising to strengthen civic space, are core religious principles that drive and guide faith actors' civic participation.

Across the world there are many faith actors that mobilise around one (or more) civic issues. For example, a participant shared the story of a priest in Sao Paulo that helps homeless people addicted to crack cocaine, despite being politically and institutionally persecuted for doing so, while another participant told of Ukrainian parishes mobilising to feed and clothe those left homeless due to the war. For these faith actors, engaging on these civic issues is part of their religious commitment and duty. Examples were also shared of faith actors intentionally choosing to become more politically involved and active, e.g., by mobilising around women's rights or mobilising to encourage the population to vote in upcoming elections.

*(The faith actors have decided) to engage in the most so-called 'modern topics' of development assistance today, which includes topics that are a lot more political than specific service delivery. So, for example, protecting civil society, protecting civil society actors, human rights activists, women's rights, and so forth. (Participant #10, 2023)*

Examples can be gathered from around the world of faith leaders who have mobilised around civic issues. For many of these individuals, taking such a stance had come at considerable personal risk, as the following examples illustrate.

Father Amila Jeevantha Peiris, a Catholic priest from Sri Lanka, partnered with youth to protest against President Rajapaksa's regime and the continuing worsening of the country's economic situation. They set up a peaceful protest camp in Colombo, where they were attacked by pro-government supporters in May 2022. Father Jeevantha and the youth group filed a complaint against the attackers, only to have the government impose a travel ban on them by revoking their passports.<sup>40</sup>

A Cambodian monk, Ven. Bor Bet, was an active social activist in his home country of Cambodia, joining November 2020 protests in Phnom Penh against the arrest of a popular labour union leader who was arrested as part of a crackdown on the opposition and civil society. After taking part in these protests, the monk faced considerable political persecution, forcing him to flee Cambodia and claim refugee status in Thailand. Yet even there he was not safe, with Thai authorities arresting him in November 2021, with the threat of deportation back to Cambodia.<sup>41</sup>

Faith actors do not only mobilise around specific civic issues. Many engage in activities that contribute to supporting and strengthening civic space generally. This is of particular value in settings where repressive governments are hesitant to persecute or limit faith actors, because the majority of the population belong to a faith group and would not react favourably to such censorship. In such settings, there are faith actors who intentionally mobilise to ensure that civic space stays active, using their 'special status' to continue in civic mobilisation and to ensure that civic space is not completely eliminated by repressive governments. One participant's example from Asia illustrates how faith actors use their special positioning in order to continue activities which other CSOs can no longer do, e.g., human rights monitoring, and to create spaces where conversations and mobilisation around civic issues can happen:

*(For example), I think faith actors are doing a fantastic job documenting and monitoring in different part of Asia. They're playing their role where civil society and other groups cannot, because they have that access in testifying to abuses, to talking to people about it. (Also) the solidarity work they're doing, you know, working with communities, particularly those who are most marginalised, like migrant workers, LGBT groups... I think that's really important, creating that space... for people to come in and engage. And that's been what I see they've been doing. (Participant #4, 2023).*

40 Perera, M.M. (2022). [Priest protesting against Rajapaksa in Colombo has passport cancelled](#). Accessed November 22, 2023.

41 RFA. (2021). [Activist Cambodian monk is defrocked, arrested in Thailand – fellow refugee](#). Accessed November 22, 2023.

Examples were offered of faith actors intentionally aligning with non-faith civil society actors in order to provide protection to these non-faith civil society actors. One way of doing so is through forming communities of practice. When a CSO that is a member of the community is then persecuted by the government, the faith actors speak up for the benefit of all the civil society actors that are part of the community of practice. The faith actors also speak out against legislation that limit CSOs and civic mobilisation. Where governments are hesitant to persecute faith actors, faith actors have a better ability to speak out and mobilise in these kinds of ways – to the benefit of all of civil society. One participant explained that in the country where they are working, this approach has proven to be effective in offering protection to civil society actors in the light of government repression:

*The community of practice now works as a unit to say ‘an injury to one is an injury to all of us.’ So, I think that’s a good approach to say we may be faith-based organisations, we may be allowed space on the basis of (being a church), but an injustice that is being done to NGO’s or civil society is an injury to us as well. (Participant #7, 2023)*

Interview participants explained that such mobilisation around a specific civic issue and contribution to strengthening and protecting civic space is a result of faith actors that recognise and embrace that they are part of civil society. By being faith actors within civil society, they help build wider, multisectoral movements, and contribute to building the faith literacy of secular civil society actors. As illustrated in the examples above, being part of civil society includes knowing about, understanding and collaborating with other (non-faith) civil society actors. In this way what faith actors do contributes to the bigger movement, and does not duplicate or counter what is already being done: “Faith should just be part and parcel of all of those spaces where secular civil society and other stakeholders are engaging, just as one of a number of legitimate voices and not trying always to carve out faith space” (Participant #2.2, 2023).



Photo: Simon Chambers/ACT





Photo: Martin Løndstrup Esquivés/DCA

## The historical role of the Church in Zimbabwe

Many faith actors in Zimbabwe have pushed for civic space during critical moments in the country's history. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), along with other faith groups and CSOs, were instrumental in institutionalising respect for fundamental freedoms, particularly after Zimbabwe's independence in 1980. The ZCC played a vital role in pushing for a home-grown constitution in the 1990s, advocating for a justice and peace agenda, as well as for free and fair elections. When Mugabe's government cracked down on activists and the opposition, the ZCC played a convening role in the building of solidarity among civil society and opposition actors. It created safe spaces for these actors to meet, strategise, and push for the respect of rights.<sup>42</sup>

Faith actors continue to utilise their role to speak out against violations of human rights. Under a civic space rated as 'repressive' by CIVICUS Monitor for its systematic attacks against fundamental freedoms, faith actors have used their distinct role to push back.<sup>43</sup> Faith actors have advocated for human rights with state actors, delivering critical messages at a time when civil society has faced reprisals for doing so.<sup>44</sup>

Faith actors have at times worked together towards protecting the civic space for their communities. For example, faith groups, the Ecumenical Church Leaders Forum of Zimbabwe, Divine Destiny, Zimbabwe Christian Alliance, and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace partnered to implement the Churches Convergence on Peace Project, supporting the formation of local peace committees. The convening of diverse actors such as local communities, traditional leaders, and other representatives (e.g., government, youth), under this project has successfully prevented conflict and politically-motivated violence.<sup>45</sup> Faith leaders have further stressed the importance of voting as a national duty whilst respecting the peaceful process.<sup>46 47</sup>

At present, faith actors continue to work with civil society to convene communities to advocate for the respect of rights, a role expected to become more prominent as new threats to civic space, in the form of more restrictive policies, surface under the current administration.

Faith actors play a role not only in protecting civic space, but also in developing it. One participant explained that civic participation is actually introduced through faith community formation, where a culture of civic participation is often founded, trained and nurtured. In churches, mosques, and temples, members experience discussion, debate and communal decision-making. These may not always be perfect examples of collaborative processes and joint decision-making, but remains a formative experience, especially for young people who do not have these experiences in the other areas of their lives.

The fact is that many faith actors already have a platform, reach and authority that can be leveraged to promote wider collaboration and dialogue around civic matters. By doing so, faith actors make a key contribution to developing and supporting civic space, for their faith spaces become spaces that facilitate civic dialogue and collaboration. Again, this is a significant contribution in settings where faith actors do not experience the same persecution and repression as other CSOs. Especially at the local level this is happening, where faith actors are facilitators of conversations, and religious buildings are the spaces for civic actors to congregate and mobilise. It should, however, be noted that, in certain settings, this freedom to create spaces for civic dialogue is not available to all faith actors, but may only apply to local faith communities and their leaders (e.g., churches and their pastors, or mosques and their imams). In such settings, other faith actors (e.g., a faith-based development organisation, or a faith-based women's organisation) may be persecuted, but the local faith communities and their leaders not. This is one of the reasons why local religious leaders and their faith communities are an important part of civil society.

*Faith actors also have access to religious networks that are comprehensive, for they are present at local, national, regional and global level. These networks tend to stay in place despite upheaval, and allows for rapid response to emergencies and in crises. This, again, helps position faith actors as agile and responsive civic actors: "I think the network that you have through your faith communities, that can be very powerful. Especially in in situations where you need rapid response"*  
(Participant #3, 2023).

42 Dan Church Aid (DCA) (2018). [Faith actor's contribution to civic space in Zimbabwe – SDG 16](#). Accessed October 18, 2023.

43 CIVICUS Monitor. (2022). [Zimbabwe Latest Updates](#). Accessed October 17, 2023

44 Lutheran World Foundation (2018). [Churches in Zimbabwe advocate against violence](#). Accessed October 17, 2023.

45 Dan Church Aid (DCA) (2022). Breaking the silos.

46 Samasumo, P. (2023). [As Zimbabweans vote, Bishops call for peaceful and non-violent elections](#). Vatican News. Accessed October 17, 2023

47 Karombo (2023). [Zimbabwe bishops warn against violence ahead of presidential election](#). National Catholic Reporter. Accessed October 17, 2023



On 1 June 2023, the Conference of Religious India sent a letter to the nuns, priests and brothers belonging to the 399 Catholic congregations in India, calling on them to step out of their comfort zones and proclaim solidarity with the various marginalised groups in the country that are seeking justice. The letter, penned by the president of the Conference, sr. Maria Nirmalini, called on all members to get involved in critical issues, to collaborate, and to support protests. This included supporting the women wrestlers from India who were demanding justice in the light of the sexual harassment they experienced, opposing the violence against Christians occurring in Manipur state, and showing solidarity with Muslims in the country who are being denigrated by Hindu radical groups. Various faith actors and faith groups belonging to the Conference of Religious India mobilised due to this call to action. For example, on 6 June 2023, Catholic nuns in Mangalore joined other groups in protesting the government's lack of response to violence against Christians in Manipur, while on 10 June 2023 various Catholic faith actors joined a silent rally in Nongpoh.<sup>48</sup>

Faith actors' religious commitment and principles drive and guide their civic participation. Interview participants explained that religious principles – e.g., justice, peace, equality, equity, mercy – are a motivation and justification for involvement in civic space around political, economic and social issues. The participants argued that involvement in the civic space is in actual fact central to religion, with key religious figures (e.g., Jesus Christ, Mohammed) offering examples of mobilising for and supporting the marginalised and vulnerable. Famous liberation movements that were driven by faith actors, e.g., Martin Luther King and Ghandi, are examples and inspiration to other faith actors, and studying these movements and faith actors also shows how civic action was driven by religious principles and commitment.

Basing their arguments and stances on religion and religious principles, which secular actors cannot do, offers faith actors a unique ability to respond, address and counter shrinking civic space. Such religious motivations and explanations communicate differently and carry weight, especially within highly religious societies.

*So I do think that (faith actors) can play a very good and important role, because we are still in a situation where a lot of people do identify with a religion and a denomination and therefore you connect with them emotionally. And, therefore, the compelling factor that faith has is very different from what a secular argument has. (Participant #2.1, 2023)*

Religious principles not only help faith actors decide on what they should do, but also ensure a deep commitment to what they are doing. Furthermore, faith actors standing up for an issue and publicly aligning with a cause carries much weight, as they are authoritative figures within their communities.

Martin Luther King, a Baptist minister and social activist, led the civil rights movement in the United States of America in the 1950's and 1960's. His arguments for desegregation were based on Christian theological ethics, and specifically natural law, the concept of imago Dei, and agape love.<sup>49</sup> As the head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he promoted nonviolent tactics in order to end the legal segregation of African Americans, arguing that "the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."<sup>50</sup> Despite experiencing many attacks on his home and self, he refused to employ bodyguards and reacted with compassion to the violence perpetrated against him, never ceasing his civic activism.<sup>51</sup>

Developing a theology that promotes civic engagement is a way of ensuring that faith actor activism stays grounded in religious principles and values. It is also a way to motivate and mobilise faith actors not yet active in the civic space, as it can help them see more clearly the link between their religious commitments and civic involvement. Such theologies are important when a crisis develops, guiding faith actors on how to respond and become involved:

*Each faith community (should) think it through: What does their faith mean for their public appearance? Their public engagement? ... (What does) the faith basis mean for their presence in the world and in society? It's important (to know this), and that can't (quickly be developed once you have a crisis, for example,)... on the night after the government has burned down the whole township. It has to be proactively established beforehand. (Participant #6, 2023)*

48 Scaria, T. (2023). [Indian Catholic religious answer nun's call to solidarity, join protests](#). Accessed November 22, 2023.

49 Spiegel, J.S. (2020). [MLK's theological case for racial justice \(and today's thin alternatives\)](#). Accessed November 22, 2023.

50 King, M.L., Jr. (1960). [Pilgrimage to nonviolence](#). Accessed November 22, 2023.

51 The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. (n.d.) [Nonviolence](#). Accessed November 22, 2023.



Photo: Håvard Bjelland/Kirkens Nødhjelp

## Religious principles encouraging civic participation

Across diverse religious traditions, there exists support for a culture of active civic participation and the nurturing of an inclusive civic space. While the theological doctrines and practices of these faiths may vary, several common principles emerge.

- In **Christianity**, the concept of "love thy neighbour" embodies a call to engage with and serve one's community, emphasising compassion and social responsibility, while the Christian notion of the common good underscores the importance of contributing to the well-being of all members of society.
- In **Islam**, the concept of "ummah", or community, encourages Muslims to work collectively for the greater good of society, while Islamic ethics emphasise justice, mercy, and caring for the marginalised, promoting social equity and harmony.
- In **Judaism**, the principle of "Tikkun Olam", or repairing the world, underscores the responsibility to actively engage in social justice and environmental stewardship, making the world a better place for all.
- **Buddhism** emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings and promotes non-violence and compassion. Engaging in civic life is seen as a way to alleviate suffering and contribute to the welfare of society.
- **Hinduism's** principles of "dharma" and "karma" emphasise one's duty to contribute positively to society and the belief in the consequences of one's actions, underscoring the importance of civic engagement.
- **Sikhi** (also known as **Sikhism**) emphasises the importance of applying wisdom in daily life (satgur ki seva). This includes dedication to justice, selfless service, and support of those who are needy regardless of their background. Sikhi encourages active involvement in social causes and promotes the welfare of all (nature, humans, and animals).





Photo: Mocica Malla/DCA



### 3.3 How and why some faith actors contribute to the shrinking of civic space

Unfortunately, the reality is that some faith actors are contributing to the shrinking of civic space. The research participants reflected on this phenomenon, identifying four key ways through which some faith actors do so. Faith actors contribute to shrinking civic space by staying silent when injustice occurs, by aligning with repressive politicians and governments, by promoting policies that are detrimental to civic space and civil society actors, and by attacking other civil society actors. Various reasons were discussed for why some faith actors choose to act in these ways.

The participants identified that a significant way through which some faith actors contribute to shrinking civic space, is by not taking up and fulfilling their own role as civil society actors. When faith actors fail to speak out when injustice occurs (be it political, economic or social injustice) they fail civic space and contribute to its shrinking. As one participant explained, based on their experiences in their own country:

*At the height of the war against drugs.... almost every day five to ten people are being killed... The human rights groups, we want to document, we want to tell the world that these killings are (happening)... But we see some faith-based groups and leaders who remained silent. So, in that way (they contributed to shrinking the civic space). By remaining silent... (Participant #1, 2023)*

The participants were harsh in condemning such faith actors' silence when human rights were being violated. The participants do not see such silence as a neutral position. Rather, such silence makes them complicit in the violations taking place:

*The church is sometimes perceived as always (in a) lame position. (For example) it calls for peace: 'Russia and Ukraine, please come and talk'. (But it is contributing to shrinking civic space by) being silent on important issues (and by not directly engaging and condemning)... By remaining silent, it means you tolerate, you allow the status quo to happen... (Participant #1, 2023)*

But why do faith actors decide to stay silent? Participants identified three main reasons. First, participants explained that many faith actors refuse to get involved in social, political or economic issues, for they do not want to be targeted by the government or by authoritarian political actors. Both as individuals, but also as religious institutions, their aim is to survive and continue their faith services to their faith group members. Fear of what can be done to them, as individual and as institution, is a major driver of some faith actors' silence and absence when injustice occurs:

*Some faith actors are actually being sought after by ultra-right-wing leaders. Either as partners or as culprits. (If as culprits): 'you're the bad guys. How can you say you're faith actors? But how can you actually promote human rights? How can you talk about SRHR? How dare you?' And (faith actors) are getting scared... getting scared for their own existence. I'm not saying it justifies (their silence), but I'm saying that it's (one of the reasons they stay silent and uninvolved). (Participant #2.1, 2023)*

Especially in countries where faith actors have a level of freedom from scrutiny by a repressive government, many faith actors do not want to lose this privilege. In this regard staying silent or uninvolved may be a way to ensure that they can continue providing their religious services to members of their faith community. Activism may lead to persecution, which could leave them unable to provide religious services (e.g., sermons, counselling, house visits, etc.) to faith group members.

A second reason why some faith actors choose to stay uninvolved in civic issues and civic space, is as they have had negative experiences of doing so. Some faith actors have in the past spoken out about injustice and stood up against repressive government actors, but have grown tired of how hard it is to do so and the backlash they face when doing so. Some now choose to stay silent and uninvolved, for they no longer see any benefit or result from activism.

One participant received this explanation when he asked older leaders of the Christian communities in his country why they are no longer advocating and mobilising for peace: "And they would just say 'uh, we are tired. We are so tired of working for the chance of peace...' They submit to helplessness and hopelessness" (Participant #1, 2023).

A third reason why some faith actors' choose non-involvement in civic action and mobilisation is as they are not sure that it is their role or place to do so, or they feel that they are not equipped to do so. Some faith actors believe that their primary responsibility is not civic activism, but to provide religious guidance and religious services to their faith group members, and they cannot engage in political, social or economic activism that interferes with their ability to fulfil their primary responsibility. For some, civic activism is not even considered, as it is deemed as falling outside their mandate. One participant shared a story of speaking with a religious elder at a conference, asking him why religious leaders and their institutions do not directly and intentionally engage in peace building in conflict areas. The religious elder gave the following answer:

*' This has been the tendency and the character of religious leaders since the religion (was) created by humans. Religious leaders are always hesitant to prioritise peace building over the literal and the direct supplying of services to their followers and their communities and their congregation. And when you come in to talk about peace-building, non-violence, interfaith dialogue, the other, diversity, you are requiring them to do more than what they think they have been trained to do. (Participant #5, 2023)*

Another way through which faith actors may contribute to shrinking civic space, is through the alliances that they form with political actors and governments that violate the rights of others. Participants offered multiple examples of faith actors publicly supporting a government's horrific violation of human rights and repression of civil society actors. Where faith actors publicly align with such repressive and authoritarian governments and leaders, it justifies these governments and leaders' actions and bring more power to those that limit civil society mobilisation and action. It is therefore understandable that authoritarian leaders will strive to have faith actors side with them. Unfortunately, this effectively inhibits such faith actors from speaking out should these authoritarian leaders limit civic space or violate human rights.

Why do some faith actors align with authoritarian political leaders that want to remove civic space? The research participants argue that a significant reason why faith actors do so, is to attain and retain power. In this regard, faith actors are the same as so many other actors, and not immune to the temptation of wanting to keep and increase the power that they have. One participant used an example from Brazil to illustrate how this desire for power can drive faith actors: "(L)iberation theology was completely squashed in Brazil by the Holy See, because they saw it as a threat. (Faith actors that upheld liberation theology) were getting very, very popular" (Participant #2.1, 2023). Aligning with an authoritarian leader or government can also be a way that faith actors can achieve their own ideals. For example, in exchange for the faith actor publicly endorsing the leader/government, the leader/government approves legislation or policies that are important to the faith actor.

The evangelical Christian support for Donald Trump in the 2016 American elections is an example of this. Evangelical Americans overwhelmingly voted for Trump, despite his personal life and actions showing very little alignment with Christian values. Once in office, Trump ensured that a priority issue of Evangelicals' was addressed: he appointed new Supreme Court judges that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, ending the general right to abortion in the USA.<sup>52</sup>

A third way through which some faith actors contribute to the shrinking of civic space, is by developing and promoting policies that are detrimental to civic space. For example, by condemning all gender and sexual diversity, they contribute to creating a hostile environment for the rights and freedoms of those with diverse SOGIESC. These policies are justified as being 'pro-faith', which is then used as a counter to any criticism against their exclusive and discriminatory content.

*(There are) policies in the works that have been led or have been composed by the faith actors, that have been detrimental to civic space. Because they have pushed this narrative against human rights or instrumentalised human rights... (Narratives of being) 'pro faith' or 'against faith' has been used to delegitimise human rights... (Faith actors are) not saying 'we hate civil society', but 'we hate those people within civil society. Look how bad they are.' (Participant #2.1)*

52 Politico Staff. (2023). [Will evangelicals finally dump Trump in 2024?](#) Accessed November 22, 2023.

## Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Law and the role of the Church of Uganda

The Anglican Church of Uganda supported the government's Anti-Homosexuality Law, passed in May 2023. In a statement, Archbishop Stephen Kaziimba referred to homosexuality as a challenge "forced on us by outside foreign actors against our will, against our culture and against our religious beliefs."<sup>53</sup> The law is considered as one of the harshest anti-SOGIESC laws in the world, imposing the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality", which covers acts such as sex with a minor or a vulnerable person, and having sex while having HIV. The Church of Uganda, however, disagreed with the death penalty clause in the law, arguing that it was inconsistent with its principle of supporting life.

Governments and human rights groups have condemned the signing of the law, highlighting its impact not just on the SOGIESC community, but also on the wider civic space. Human rights activists and members of the SOGIESC community have expressed increased intimidation and discrimination since the law was passed. Under its "promoting homosexuality" clause, which carries a 20-year sentence, the law imposes restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom.<sup>54</sup> The publishing or broadcasting of content which can be seen as promoting the rights of those with diverse SOGIESC can, due to this clause, be interpreted as promoting homosexuality.

In response to the Church of Uganda's position, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, drafted a letter to Kaziimba stating his disappointment with their decision. In his public statement, Welby called the Church of Uganda's support for the law a "fundamental departure" from the Anglican Church's "commitment to uphold the freedom and dignity of the people," and urged the Church of Uganda to reconsider its position.<sup>55</sup>

A final way through which some faith actors contribute to shrinking civic space, is by attacking other civil society actors. CSOs that mobilise around particular issues that are deemed counter to religious beliefs (e.g., gender equality or the rights of those with diverse SOGIESC) are particularly prone to being targeted in this way by some faith actors. The participants offered multiple examples of this: faith actors in the Pacific Islands region mobilising against SOGIESC rights and the organisations that represent them; right-wing Buddhist groups in Myanmar that vilify the Rohingya Muslim community and justify the violence perpetrated against them; and religious leaders persecuting Muslim women's organisations that promote women's rights.

Reasons emerged from the interviews with the participants for why some faith actors contribute in this way to the shrinking of civic space. Participants explained that some faith actors directly attack other CSOs, or develop and promote policies that limit civil society, as this is a way to attain more power. Furthermore, if a faith actor does not see itself as part of civil society, it may have no qualms about targeting CSOs and civic space. Such faith actors may feel no obligation or reason to support civic space, especially if not supporting civic space and other CSOs can gain them more power: "(Some churches) do not see themselves as a part of civil society. They see themselves as a power that can influence and get more benefits depending on whatever they want to promote" (Participant #9, 2023).

There are also some faith actors that oppose civic organising and CSOs if their views and activities are seen as opposing religious faith and dogma. As discussed earlier, this happens especially in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights, with faith actors mobilising against issues such as abortion, contraception, gender equality and the rights of those with diverse SOGIESC. If the agenda promoted by civic actors are seen as going against religious beliefs, faith actors can be moved to oppose civil actors, even going so far as to align with repressive political actors and legislation that will limit civic actors and civic space.

*(T)hey are particularly (repressive of other civil society actors) on issues related to sexual morality. You can see faith actors and out of what they think is defence of dogma, of their faith, they would step in and oppose... There are examples (of them) proactively campaigning, for instance, for the banning of LGBT (rights). (Participant #6, 2023)*

53 Church of Uganda. (2023). [Church of Uganda Grateful for Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023](#). Accessed October 17, 2023.

54 Kaledzi (2023). [Uganda: New Anti-LGBTQ+ Law Restricts Media and Activists Too](#). DW.com. Accessed October 17, 2023

55 Welby, J. (2023). [Archbishop of Canterbury's Statement on the Church of Uganda](#). The Archbishop of Canterbury. Accessed October 17, 2023

### 3.4 Learning from faith actors

There are faith actors across the world that are mobilising to strengthen civic space and counter the ways in which it is shrinking, and much can be learned from them. This section captures promising practices and lessons learnt from faith actors contributing to civic space, as captured in interview participants' reflections, review of DCA documentation, as well as literature review. The promising practices and lessons learned are organised below in five main subsections.

#### 3.4.1 Impactful faith actors recognise themselves as part of civil society

Many faith actors started to intentionally contribute to and strengthen civic space when they recognised themselves as civil society actors and as role-players within civic space. This led to a realisation of the roles they can fulfil and the potential impact they can have, which motivated many to become active in civic space. For many it also meant realisation that their silence when injustices are perpetrated can be interpreted as tacit support and therefore impacts civil space generally.

Many impactful faith actors not only recognise that they are civil society actors, but also collaborate and partner with other civil society actors, realising that they have much less impact on strengthening civic space if they function alone or in a religious silo. Such collaboration has included engaging and collaborating with ecumenical partners, interfaith actors, CSOs and other civil society actors. While such collaborations may be challenging, and requires all partners to move beyond their personal (e.g., ethnical, tribal, national) priorities, many faith actors have experienced the wide-ranging impact that it can have. Many faith actors that have participated in collaborations have also realised that they do not have to agree on every issue with all others within the civic space. Pragmatic choices can be made to collaborate on issues that all can support.

Faith actors that strengthen civic space have done so when they recognised that they have special status and reach because of their religious identity and affiliation, and they chose to use that positioning for the benefit of all of civil society. Specific ways in which they have done this includes: using the opportunities and spaces they have to meet with political leaders to lobby for civic space, CSOs and/or around specific civic issues; using their platform and reach to draw public attention to where CSOs are being persecuted; acting as mediators between civil society actors and political leaders when there is an absence of trust, and/or using different strategies of diplomacy to better the situation for civil society actors; and using their local, regional, national and international religious networks to draw attention to where civic space and CSOs are under threat.



Photo: Estelle Marais/ACT



### 3.4.2 Impactful faith actors are informed

Faith actors that are well-positioned to develop and protect civic space tend to be ones that have a clear understanding of civic issues, civic space, the actors active within it, and the political and legislative space within which civic space exists. Such faith actors' opinions and positions are informed by facts and evidence and their collaborations and partnerships reflect an in-depth understanding of the issue and situation. The interview participants explained that faith actors who do not understand the key issues, risk promoting a position that is detrimental to civic space and/or the well-being of people. Interventions by faith actors, either to promote civic space or to intervene on a civic issue, are effective when they are built on a thorough understanding of the issue.

*Building interventions, whether it is on labour rights or gender rights, or in opposition to a restrictive public order act: (faith actors) need to base their interventions on research. And there are many faith actors who are lured into responding a bit emotionally to a human rights infringement... without really thinking it through. And they need to be seen as serious partners in dialogue and therefore they need to invest in a bit of research. (Participant #6, 2023)*

At the same time, impactful faith actors are also constantly and critically reflecting on their positioning on civic issues by listening to the people in the communities that they serve. By doing so, they ensure that they constantly reflect, and allow others to give input on, what they should be civically mobilising around.

This is illustrated by a small Islamic school in Indonesia, which understood the marginalisation and discrimination that transgender Muslims can experience when worshipping in a mosque. Therefore, the Islamic boarding school was started in order to provide safety and community for transgender Muslims. Founded in 2008, the Pondok Pesantren Waria Al-Fatah school in Yogyakarta describes itself as an Islamic boarding school for transgender people (although it is not officially registered as an Islamic school or Islamic boarding school with the Ministry of Religion).<sup>56</sup> Since 2008 it has provided a safe space for transgender Muslims to pray, read and recite the Qur'an, and observe Muslim holy days and traditions. During Ramadan, it opens its doors to all transgender Muslims (not only those boarding there), as a space where they can observe Ramadan and pray together.<sup>57</sup>

Not all faith actors that mobilise within the civic space have a long-term vision. But those that develop longer term plans and strategies on how to develop civic space, develop civil society partnerships, and engage with government, can be more effectively positioned to do so. This is as they are then not only reactively responding to injustices and challenges to civic space, but instead proactively plan.

<sup>56</sup> Hajid, S. & Husada, T. (2023). [‘We don’t know where we’re going next’ – The fate of trans women at Al-Fatah Yogyakarta Waria Islamic Boarding School after the death of Shinta Ratri](#). Accessed November 22, 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Yi, B.L. (2019). [Indonesia’s transgender Muslims find safe haven for prayer during Ramadan](#). Accessed November 22, 2023.

### 3.4.3 Impactful faith actors are guided by their core religious principles

Faith actors that do not separate their involvement in civic space and civic issues from their religious commitments, beliefs and principles, tend to be very impactful in strengthening civic space. Such faith actors have a special role within the civic space, as their moral compass is based on their religious principles, and therefore tends to be consistent. In their engagement in civic space, these faith actors are guided by their core religious principles, rather than by their personal fears, biases and interests, or a need to hold onto power.

*We have values that are needed... And so when you have a chance to present and speak, you're able to carry those values into a space that is also value-driven, but maybe... it's not so (explicit)... I feel like maybe sometimes they're missing an anchor. Like we have faith, faith actors have an anchor... And with that anchor, we're able to stick with these core things.*  
(Participant #3, 2023)

The power and authority of religiously-backed positioning and arguments should not be underestimated. Unlike secular civil society actors, faith actors are able to use religious principles and arguments in defence of civic space and/or to mobilise around a specific civic issue. This is a unique line of argumentation that only faith actors have access to, and which communicates and convinces in a different way.

Faith actors that have taken the time and effort to capture and formulate how their religious principles and values meet and determine their civic positioning and engagement, tend to be more able to quickly respond and adapt as civic crises develop. For example, where a faith actor has identified their religion as prioritising love, respect, justice and non-discrimination to all, this becomes a clear guidance and call to action if the government proposes new legislation that discriminates against those with diverse SOGIESC.

The interview participants repeatedly emphasised that faith actors who are impactful in the civic space are ones that do not align with specific political actors. While faith actors are and should be involved in political issues, this should not mean unquestioning allegiance to a particular political actor or group. On the contrary, faith actors are discouraged from endorsing certain politicians or political parties. This does not mean that faith actors cannot ever support a government or politician's stance on a certain civic issue. Rather, the emphasis is on doing so while maintaining their impartiality and independence.



Photo: Simon Chambers/ACT

### 3.4.4 Impactful faith actors play to their strengths

Faith actors are more able to strengthen civic space and affect change in civic issues when they leverage their unique strengths, platforms, reach, networks and authority. Faith actors are only a part of civil society and other civil society actors have different strengths and abilities, and recognising the importance of collaboration and partnership also means recognising that each partner should do what they do best. Faith actors therefore tend to be impactful when they mobilise for civic space in ways that they are best able to, e.g., by preaching on violence against women and girls on the Sundays that fall during 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence, or by teaching on human rights during women's group sessions. This also means recognising that not all faith actors have the same strengths. For example, the reach and opportunities of a Hindu pandit in a local community is different from that of the director of an international faith-based development organisation.

However, the fact that these faith actors play to their strengths does not mean that they do not challenge themselves. Many faith actors have realised and accepted that being civically minded and active requires them to become involved on sensitive and difficult issues – and they are willing to engage this complexity. Impactful faith actors are ones that have realised that the civic space requires them to be bold, and to boldly and consistently speak out where they see injustices perpetrated. For some, it has demanded transformation of their own religious institutions. In this regard, a number of participants specifically advised faith actors to more intentionally take on patriarchal systems and structures, both within their own institutions but also in society in general.

*(Taking a stand on) gender (is needed)... because that is one of the most critical, I think, and most complicated. Because the religions in general, they are still extremely patriarchal in the approach they use, and also using social and cultural norms that are completely against the Christian principles and religious principles and human rights as well. (Faith actors) need to take this step. (Participant #9, 2023)*



Photo: Magnus Aronson/ACT



### 3.4.5 Impactful faith actors make faith spaces into spaces for civic engagement

Impactful faith actors are not only civically involved themselves, but create space and opportunities that encourage civic participation and activism amongst others. Especially faith actors that have literal space for gathering and exchange (e.g., a church, mosque or temple) are able to use these unique facilities, spaces and platforms to facilitate awareness, education, discussion and collaboration around civic issues and civic engagement. Religious platforms and meetings (e.g., sermons, prayer meetings, men's groups, choir practice, etc.) then become spaces where faith actors talk about issues topical to promoting civic participation and civic space. Those who lead faith communities see it as part of their responsibilities to grow the understanding and capacity of faith community members on civic issues, such as human rights and advocacy.

Impactful faith actors also use their faith platforms and facilities as safe meeting spaces for activists. For example, in settings where civil society is monitored and repressed by an authoritarian government, faith actors may be the only ones that can freely organise group gatherings and meetings. Impactful faith actors build on this, by becoming safe spaces for existing activists, but also training a new generation of civically aware and active citizens.

*You know, religious spaces are one of the few spaces available for people to come together and reach out. So it will be good if they can facilitate that in some way between activists and the community, or even between activists. In a sense, I would also encourage them to help with even training a younger generation of activists. You know, bringing them together because a lot of them are already in the churches, in the mosques, in the temples. (Participant #4, 2023)*



Photo: Nebiyat Seifedin/DCA



### 3.5 Learning how to work with faith actors to strengthen civic space

The previous section discussed promising practices and lessons learnt from faith actors on how to develop civic space and counter its shrinking. What has emerged from this section, as well as the earlier sections reflecting on what faith actors are doing to strengthen civic space, is that faith actors do not exist or act in a vacuum. Collaboration is key to effectively defending and growing civic space. This section, therefore, discussed the guidance offered by the interview participants to non-faith actors (both within and outside of civil society) that wish to engage with faith actors in strengthening civic space.

#### 3.5.1 Accept that faith actors are a heterogenous group

The participants that were interviewed emphasised the importance of understanding the specific faith actors present in a specific setting. Faith actors are a very big, very diverse group, spread across the world and functioning in very different contexts, and they do not all fulfil the same roles in their respective settings. For example, the influence and role of a pastor of a local community church is different from that of the director of a Buddhist humanitarian organisation. This should be taken into account when secular actors engage faith actors around their role and involvement in civic space. Recognising the diversity will help in avoiding snap judgements that are based on sweeping generalisations and may inhibit collaboration. What is true of faith actors in one setting, is not in another, as this example from a participant illustrates:

*(The Catholic Church) was actually supporting the dictatorship in Argentina, and just across the border in Brazil, it was the other way around. (There) it was supporting those that were standing against the dictatorship and trying to silently protect those. So it really shifts, because you have to remember it's people! People are behind those institutions and there are different groups, different theologies and different ways of thinking and acting within those institutions.*  
(Participant #2.1, 2023)

Participants explained that this diversity is made even further complex by the fact that activism in and for civic space is often because of the individual, rather than due to a fixed religious position. This means that faith actors from a specific faith group do not uniformly mobilise on the same issues and in the same ways. Development of theologies or position statements that align with or even encourage civic mobilisation is an important component of mobilising faith actors for civic participation, yet individual agency still plays a significant role: "In many contexts, that's as much down to the individuals who hold those positions in a church or a mosque... (rather than) a firm and fixed kind of religious decree or position" (Participant #2.2, 2023).

This means that understanding the religious landscape of civic participation requires more than only knowing which different religions are present and what their principles generally are on civic space and civic participation. Those who wish to engage with faith actors will also need to develop understanding of how different groups of faith actors in that specific setting view these issues. The reality is also that some faith actors may even play conflicting roles, by in some ways strengthening civic space, and in other ways contributing to its shrinking. This again emphasises the importance of understanding the specific context and the specific groups of faith actors present.

## The Roman Catholic Church in Italy and its dual role on advocating for rights

The Roman Catholic Church in Italy is an example of how a faith actor can play a dual role, by promoting civic space and civic activism through some of its policies and activities, while at the same time limiting civic space and civic rights through other policies and practices.

The Catholic Church's positive role in environmental conservation is exemplified through the Encyclical *Laudato Si*, authored by Pope Francis. This document highlights individual and collective responsibility towards protecting the environment and calls for a vision of development that promotes social justice. It emphasises Catholic teachings on respecting the world and all of humanity, including future generations, and seeks to redefine progress as being grounded in the interconnectedness of all beings, to the earth but also to one another. This perspective spurs action towards protecting the environment and each other, particularly the poor in society. Emphasising how everyone is connected, it recognises the role of each individual as well as of the collective community in addressing global issues.

Yet the Catholic Church have also pushed for conservative policies that threaten civic space. Since the spring of 2013, religious and socially conservative groups have spearheaded protests during the parliamentary deliberations on civil marriages, anti-homophobia laws, and gender education in schools.<sup>58</sup> These protests advocate against the proposed policies and reveal a distinctive conservative activism.<sup>59 60</sup>



Photo: Sean Hawkey/ACT

58 Garbagnoli, S. & Prearo, M (2017). [La croisade "anti-genre". Du Vatican au Manif pour Tous](#). Paris: Éditions Textuel. 128 pages. Accessed October 17, 2023.

59 Brake, S. & Paternotte, D. (eds) (2016). [Unpacking the sin of gender](#). Religion & Gender, 6(2), pp. 142-54. Accessed October 17, 2023.

60 Kuhar, R. & Paternotte, D. (2017). *Anti-gender Campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing Against Equality*, London: Rowman & Littlefield.

### 3.5.2 Be intentional and realistic in expectations of faith actors

Participants strongly encouraged secular civil society actors to intentionally collaborate and partner with faith actors. This is as faith actors have a unique position, platform and influence, but also, as SDG 17 emphasises, multi-stakeholder engagement is crucial, including for ensuring a healthy and impactful civic space.

*(F)aitth-based organisations or faith actors are actually strategic partners, because they don't come with a lot of other baggage that generally comes with the civil society. They work within specific structures and they carry a special certain respect from the state... (Faith actors are actually) low-hanging fruit! (Because)... of the theological (motivation) and the whole church space too. (Participant #7, 2023)*

However, participants warned against putting all responsibility – for the shrinking of civic space and for countering this tendency – on faith actors. As discussed earlier, multisectoral factors drive the shrinking of civic space and it will require multi-sectoral responses to address the phenomenon. It may also be that religion and faith actors are falsely implicated, as religion is often misused or become a scapegoat after the fact. One participant used India to illustrate how this happens: “Look at... India at the moment and the extent to which, you know, is that actually religion or is it politics using religion?” (Participant #2.2, 2023). Faith actors are just one stakeholder group within civil society, and as such is only a part of the problem and a part of the solution.

*I'm not sure we can blame or we can place sole responsibility on the faith-based agencies in defending the civil society's space or in explaining the shrinking of the civic space. They are one force and an important one in many places, and if we're able to work with it, we can be very effective in many ways. But... they have an important role but not (an) exclusive role... (Participant # 5, 2023)*

In reflecting on collaborating with faith actors, participants considered critically what can and should be expected of faith actors. While faith actors may be silent on civic issues, and/or not countering the shrinking of civic space, this does not mean they are not fulfilling their other roles, which is also important and much-needed. Some participants wondered whether it is fair to demand of all faith actors to be active on multiple civic issues and actively resist the shrinking of civic space. Especially in the case of the faith leaders of small, local faith communities, is it fair to expect such a level of activism? Furthermore, there is also the risk that the good that these faith actors are doing in local communities (e.g., counselling, livelihood support, social cohesion) is lost when they are persecuted by government actors for being civically vocal and active. In this regard, some participants reflected on the role of donors in ‘forcing’ faith actors to become more civically active. One participant, part of a faith-based organisation active in humanitarian work, commented on how funders insist that they address or respond to certain specific civic issues. Rather than allowing them to respond to the civic issues emerging from the situation and needs of the population the organisation serves, they are expected to proactively advocate on things that they actually feel is not a priority within their fragile context. Yet they have to do so, as they rely on the funding for their other humanitarian work: “It's not the issue now, and every time they stick that in. I'm always like ‘you all are completely not in context! You're inserting something that (this country) hasn't started dealing with yet!’” (Participant #3, 2023). There has to be careful, contextual consideration and reflection on what is expected of faith actors and what the implications of those expectations are.

*If we push local religious leaders or our small faith-based communities or organisations into becoming politically active, we sort of moved them... further away from their classical role of actually being a sort of duty bearer in these local communities because of their service delivery role. I mean, the church and faith-based organisations, as you know, they are strong in communities where the government has not been able to provide the basic service delivery that was needed of them. The church comes in and they provide basic services, health, education, food assistance, etcetera... But now, in this new modern context, where donors... come in and have lots of priorities when it comes to civil society, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, etcetera... The question behind it (is): should we even push these actors to protect civic space? And if we ask that question, we should definitely also ask the question of what are the consequences of doing so. We need a better understanding of...what damage that might do to these actors. (Participant #10, 2023)*





Photo: DCA

### 3.5.3 Positioning and attitude when engaging with faith actors

The participants emphasised the importance of engagement with faith actors being done with an attitude of respect and non-judgement, and an openness and willingness to learn about the role and value of religion. Many secular actors, due to their own personal opinions about religion, refuse to engage with faith actors, ignore what they can offer, or are discriminatory and biased when they are forced to engage with faith actors. Being willing to engage does not mean that everyone has to agree about everything. Rather, there must simply be a willingness to be transparent and learn about each other.

*So I think this is my advice: respect and openness. Sometimes we agree on our readings of the signs of the times, or we disagree, but it's good, it's okay. At least we thought things through together and we know each other and we continue to grow. (Participant #1, 2023)*

Part of how secular actors can learn about faith actors, is to increase their understanding of religion. Secular actors should be curious, doing the needed preparation to understand the religious landscape of the setting where they are working, and building their faith literacy. Part of learning about religions and building faith literacy, is acknowledging that the majority of the world's people are religious, and attempting to ignore or by-pass religion is to the detriment of interventions.

*(It is an) illusion to think you can outmanoeuvre faith actors and have change. (To think you can avoid) them I think is a grand illusion... There may be harms from the past, because religion is ambiguous. But try still to understand the power, the relevance, the importance of faith for the people. (Participant #6, 2023)*

## 4. Conclusion

Civic space provides individuals and groups important space and rights. It ensures that they can express their opinions and organise in ways that ensure that they participate in the political, economic and social decisions that impact them. The shrinking of civic space is therefore a grave issue, as it fundamentally threatens people's right to have a say in important decisions that affect them. The reduction or repression of civic space is a global phenomenon, driven by various factors, and impacting the rights and freedoms of many people, especially marginalised, minority groups.

Drawing on document and literature review, case studies and key informant interviews, this study explored the shrinking of civic space, focusing on the role of faith actors. Faith actors, as a part of civil society, was shown to play roles in developing and strengthening civic space, but also in the reduction/repression of civic space. Eleven participants, all active within global and/or regional civic space, were interviewed to gather their insights on what faith actors are doing to strengthen civic space, how and why faith actors contribute to shrinking civic space, but also the promising practices that have emerged from impactful faith actors active within civic space. Guidance was also offered for how secular actors can better collaborate with faith actors to strengthen civic space.

All of the participants strongly felt that faith actors can and should be playing a role in civic space, drawing on their unique positioning and motivation to help promote the rights of all. This is arguably well captured in the quote that is in the title of this report, which draws attention to the unique value-add of faith actors to the protection of civic space: "We have values that are needed... (F)ait h actors have an anchor... (Participant #3, 2023)." Faith actors' core religious values arguably offer them unique motivation and direction for their civic engagement. This should be embraced in engaging with faith actors to support civic space.





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