
NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

The guidebook has thus far described the relevant international mechanisms available to religious freedom advocates. In utilizing these mechanisms, however, advocates rarely act as individuals. More commonly, they conduct their advocacy through the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to which they belong, including both religiously based organizations and secular groups. This chapter will provide a practical overview of NGOs, explaining the diverse roles they play in advocating for religious freedom.

NGO OVERVIEW

Identity and Motivation

Though widely varied in structure and function, religious freedom NGOs share a common nongovernmental identity that affords them several general advantages. First, they maintain a significant amount of autonomy in the strategies and methodologies they employ to advocate for religious freedom, unconstrained by many of the political and bureaucratic limitations of national or international bodies. This autonomy allows them to speak more frankly, act more quickly, and innovate more freely than can international bodies and governments. In addition, NGOs typically can more easily access and gain the trust of persecuted faith communities, especially if they are coreligionists, as persecuted groups are often suspicious of governmental agencies because of past mistreatment.

Their nongovernmental status is not the only commonality among NGOs; they also share a commitment to religious freedom as a fundamental human right and a deep compassion for victims of religious persecution. The reasons for this commitment vary widely, however. One common motivation is the religious identity of the organizations themselves. Many religious groups form NGOs specifically dedicated to the freedom of their faith

internationally. These organizations are typically staffed by adherents to the faith and are motivated by shared religious beliefs and concern for their coreligionists around the world.

One might expect that the differences in religious identities of these NGOs would hinder their ability to collaborate in promoting religious freedom internationally. However, faith-based religious freedom NGOs typically acknowledge that improved religious freedom benefits all faith communities, both their own and others', and there are many positive examples of interfaith collaboration in the field. Notably, the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act was passed in large part through the joint efforts of faith-based religious freedom NGOs lobbying the U.S. Congress. These NGOs ranged from the Religious Action Committee of Reform Judaism, to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, to the National Association of Evangelicals, to the Uighur-American Association (representing the largely Muslim Uighur people in China).

Faith-based NGOs possess certain advantages. Because of shared beliefs with victims, they often more easily gain victims' trust and are able to obtain detailed testimonies of abuses that victims may otherwise be too frightened or suspicious to share with nonbelievers. In addition, these NGOs' religious identity connects them to an international network of fellow faith adherents, providing a ready base of contacts around the world from whom to obtain information.

However, the same religious identity that wins trust in the field can bring about suspicion from foreign governments. Faith-based NGOs may be suspected of funneling financial or religious resources to their coreligionists, or using their human rights work as a guise under which to conduct proselytizing activities. These NGOs may also have difficulty working with Western governments, secular human rights organizations, and international bodies. These entities are often careful not to compromise their secular identities by supporting religious work through funding or partnerships.

Religious belief is not the only motivation behind religious freedom NGOs. Many advocates possess a deeply held commitment to human rights with no religious affiliation, and many human rights organizations are avowedly secular, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. This secular identity helps such organizations avoid skepticism about a hidden religious agenda, erecting fewer barriers to collaboration with secular entities, and allows them to work with all victims of persecution rather than those of

a particular faith group. Furthermore, they have easier access to partnerships and funding from nonreligious sources, including large philanthropic foundations and governments.

A final motivation for religious freedom advocacy is commitment to a complementary cause. For example, in some areas, large numbers of women convert to Christianity because it promises them greater social status. An NGO that works for gender equality in this area may necessarily become involved in advocating for religious freedom for these new female converts. Similarly, socioeconomic development among communities of religious minorities is often hampered by their governments' discrimination against them. Development NGOs may need to address religious freedom issues in order to effectively improve the socioeconomic conditions of these communities. In these examples, the NGOs may conduct their advocacy directly through the channels described in this book, or they may partner with religious freedom NGOs so that their work supports one another. Thus, religious freedom work may be carried out by NGOs with seemingly disparate missions, whose motivation for advocacy is neither religious belief nor human rights, but commitment to a related issue. Other issues that may overlap with religious freedom in a given context include press freedom, property rights, and ethnic minority rights, among many others. (Conversely, religious freedom NGOs sometimes find that they must address complementary issues, such as development or education, in order to effectively advocate for religious freedom in a given context.)

Structure and Function

Religious freedom NGOs are typically governed by boards of directors, which can range in size from several to dozens of members. They vary just as widely in organizational structure. An NGO may be as small as just a few employees and on-the-ground contacts, or it may be a subset of a large, international organization with vast financial and human resources.

TYPES OF NGO ACTIVITIES

NGO functions—embodied in the NGOs' unique visions, missions, and methodologies—are as varied as their structures. Below are descriptions of common functions; organizations may perform one, several, or all of these as part of their advocacy. Because of the great variety that exists, this list is not exhaustive, and many overlaps occur.

Gathering and Disseminating Information

In repressive climates, where speech and press freedoms are also restricted, information about religious freedom abuses is often difficult to obtain. Many religious freedom NGOs work with on-the-ground contacts—including government officials, aid workers, and coreligionists—to obtain such information. NGOs must take steps to determine the veracity of the information they receive. For example, victims' testimonies are often more reliable when obtained through face-to-face contact, using a trusted translator (i.e., provided by the NGO rather than the government). Many repressive governments monitor correspondence, e-mail, and phone calls, making contacts less likely to share information openly over these channels. Concurrent reports from multiple trusted sources can validate these first-person testimonies. Such steps are important in filtering false or exaggerated claims, which some religious adherents may make accidentally or purposefully (to bring attention, funds, or followers to their cause). A religious freedom NGO risks its own credibility by perpetuating such claims, whether intentionally or through carelessness.

After obtaining reliable testimony, NGOs disseminate information about abuses in a number of formats: e-mail campaigns, public presentations, reports, press releases, editorials, and consultations with relevant government agencies and international bodies (described in previous chapters). Those who receive the information may then use it to augment and support their own advocacy efforts.

Most religious freedom NGOs perform this function in some capacity, often as a foundation for their programs. They may also rely on the information gathered by other NGOs to verify and enhance their own findings.

Examples of NGOs that gather and disseminate information include Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Compass Direct, and Open Doors.

Generating Pressure and Influencing Policy

NGOs can also attempt to generate pressure against repressive governments in hopes of bringing about changes to policies affecting religious freedom. This pressure is often overt, designed to embarrass foreign countries that violate religious freedom. Such embarrassment threatens repressive regimes in several ways. First, shame is a powerful tool in many non-Western cultures, where concepts such as “saving face” are highly valued. Second, public embarrassment may embolden dissidents within the regime, as they perceive global

public opinion to be sympathetic to their cause. These dissidents' protests may undermine the government's ability to maintain order and thus threaten their hold on power. Finally, many repressive governments are in developing countries, where favorable relations with powerful Western countries are important for economic growth and international aid. These governments fear that negative attention will lead Western countries to alter favorable policies. For these reasons, the threat of public shaming can be sufficient to elicit accommodations (albeit sometimes minimal) in religious freedom policies.

NGOs apply pressure to offending governments through such means as press releases, editorials, Web sites, e-mail campaigns, petitions, phone calls to government officials and representatives, testimonies to international organizations and domestic government bodies, and public protests. These activities draw attention to governments' poor religious freedom records, in hopes of creating widespread public concern and influencing leaders to take action against unfavorable policies. Such policies may include, among others, demarching a capital to raise concerns, designating a country as a Country of Particular Concern (described in detail in Chapter 8), denying normal trade relations, withdrawing diplomatic representation or severing diplomatic relations, imposing sanctions, or failing to support bids to join international bodies such as the World Trade Organization.

Most religious freedom NGOs include some of these policy activities in their work and have one or several employees who liaise with government officials and international bodies about religious freedom issues.

Examples of such NGOs include Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, World Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission, Jubilee Campaign, Human Rights First, International League for Human Rights, and the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom.

Informing Foreign Policy

As the previous section indicated, many NGOs seek to influence the policies of their governments in response to religious freedom abuses by other countries. Another aspect of influencing policy, however, is working to make religious freedom a more prominent issue in foreign policy considerations. The passage of the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998 made significant advances toward this goal in the United States, guaranteeing religious freedom's prominent role in American foreign policy. However, many Western policymakers remain generally uninformed about religious freedom

and, more basically, about the role of religion in international affairs, a topic that is generally avoided in traditional foreign service courses. For this reason, some NGOs are working to increase the understanding of the importance of religion and religious freedom in foreign affairs. This work may take the form of journal articles, lecture series, conferences, and dialogues that highlight the importance of religious freedom in foreign policy considerations.

Examples of NGOs that perform this function include the Institute on Religion and Public Policy, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, and the Council on Faith and International Affairs.

Assisting Victims of Persecution

Some religious freedom NGOs focus their efforts on supplying aid to victims of persecution. This aid can take many forms: legal aid to assist victims in filing claims with relevant agencies and courts; material assistance to families of victims who have been imprisoned or killed; medical or mental care for a religious believer who has been tortured; religious resources, including sacred texts and teaching materials, that are illegal or too expensive to obtain normally; assisting religious refugees with documentation, referrals, sponsorship, and resettlement; or other types of assistance. This kind of work is often carried out by faith-based NGOs concerned about the plight of coreligionists in hostile areas. Their assistance may also take more abstract forms, such as organizing moments of silence or days of prayer dedicated to those persecuted for the faith.

Although these activities may seem less political than those described in previous sections, they are often viewed with suspicion or hostility by foreign governments and local communities. Traditional societies sometimes view religious minorities as traitors who have adopted a foreign culture, undermining indigenous culture and power structures. When these believers then receive aid from foreign organizations, this view is reinforced, confirming suspicions and creating resentment. Providing religious resources can be controversial, as it can jeopardize the safety of the recipients and, in some cases, violate the laws of the state.

Examples of NGOs that aid victims of persecution include Voice of the Martyrs, International Christian Concern, Christian Solidarity International, Iranian Christians International, Christian Freedom International, and Physicians for Human Rights.

Mediating Religious Freedom Conflicts

Some NGOs seek to mediate conflicts between religious communities and the governments that repress them. These NGOs seek to persuade governments to protect religious freedom, and to persuade religious believers to act in ways that do not unnecessarily provoke government suspicion or trigger a reaction. In persuading governments, a straightforward appeal to human dignity and justice is rarely effective. While a repressive government may value these concepts, it has already shown through its religious freedom violations that it values other interests more—such as social stability, cultural preservation, or maintaining power. Thus, persuasion must appeal to some aspect of governmental self-interest.

This kind of work is typically more quiet and gradual than those types described in previous sections. Public shaming and covert activities can be counterproductive strategies if they engender suspicion rather than trust. Instead, by seeking to respect national sovereignty, NGOs can quietly build relationships with key leaders and create a climate of trust. This relationship will allow the NGO to offer direct critiques of government actions at strategic moments, many of which will be private conversations rather than public meetings. NGOs may also host nonthreatening events, such as scholarly conferences and policy forums, in which non-Western scholars and practitioners subtly argue the importance of religious freedom. Such strategies give governments ownership of the concepts of religious freedom, helping them to understand its importance and implement it in ways that are tailored to their unique social context. NGOs hope that such ownership will lead to long-term change, not only in laws and policies, but in the mindset of the government. Religious freedom will thus be embraced, rather than merely tolerated in order to appease foreign governments and reduce international pressure.

These NGOs must also work closely with religious groups, being careful not to alienate them through an inappropriately close relationship with the government. Their interactions with these communities may vary widely, depending on the circumstances. NGOs may use trusted faith leaders to help educate others in the community about their rights under international or national laws, to encourage culturally sensitive practices that are less threatening to the government (without compromising core beliefs), or to counsel against activities that only exacerbate the problem, such as paying bribes in exchange for government protection. NGOs may also sponsor dialogue

between faith leaders and their communities or governments, aimed at reconciling disputes and correcting misperceptions. They may even promote seemingly unrelated activities, such as theological or literacy training for uneducated believers, in order to prevent the emergence of radical leaders who pervert the faith to persuade people to take violent action against the state.

This kind of quiet work is unconventional, and thus NGOs conducting it are far less common than those described above. One example is the Institute for Global Engagement.

Developing and Promoting Rule of Law

Many countries that repress religious freedom do not have a well-developed legal system and tradition of rule of law. As a result, laws and treaties protecting religious freedom are sometimes ignored or arbitrarily interpreted in whatever way officials choose, often in accordance with security concerns or cultural biases. When religious freedom violations occur, victims rarely have access to legal representation, and if they do, they cannot be guaranteed a fair trial. As a result, strengthening countries' legal systems and providing legal assistance is important to improving religious freedom in the long term as a right that is firmly upheld in law. Some religious freedom NGOs work primarily in this field, using a variety of strategies.

One common strategy is filing lawsuits on behalf of victims in international tribunals or in the domestic courts of offending countries. These lawsuits not only provide expert legal representation to victims who might otherwise not have access; they also raise the profile of such cases, leveraging popular opinion against the government and thus indirectly applying pressure.

Another strategy is to work from within to develop the legal system's capacity. Activities may include assisting in curriculum development at local law schools, providing training for lawyers and judges, or working with national lawmakers to develop religious freedom laws that are in accordance with international standards. The final activity is often best done through neutral third parties rather than through a Western NGO. For example, an NGO may facilitate a meeting or conference between regional lawmakers and legal scholars, including those who the NGO knows are committed to religious freedom. These non-Western scholars are able to influence their counterparts in more repressive regimes, convincing them of the merits of religious freedom and helping them to codify it into domestic law.

Examples of this kind of NGO include the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and Advocates International.

ADVOCACY ACTIONS

The above descriptions of NGO functions are a starting point for understanding the types of work that religious freedom advocates can do. Despite their differences, these functions are most effective when applied together, building momentum toward greater religious freedom through a wide variety of complementary strategies. The first step for the would-be advocate is to decide not which strategy is superior, but which NGO is a good fit with one's own beliefs, education, and skills. Appendix V contains a list of religious freedom NGOs and contact information to help advocates begin their research.

Once one or several NGOs are selected, opportunities for advocacy include volunteering office time (answering phones, delivering mail, filing), participating on event-planning committees, raising funds or contributing financially, educating others about the work of the NGO and the issue of religious freedom, making strategic introductions to connect the NGO with relevant contacts, providing pro bono legal work, or pursuing employment.