

Policy Brief

International Pressure in Promoting FoRB: Envisioning Collaboration among Local Advocates and the International Community on FoRB Advocacy in Indonesia

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“The European Parliament ... express grave concern at the incidents of violence against religious minorities, particularly Ahmadi Muslims, Christians, Baha’is and Buddhists; is concerned that violations of religious freedom undermine the human rights guaranteed in the Indonesian Constitution, including the prohibition of discrimination and freedom of expression, opinion and peaceful assembly”. This statement, issued as part of the European Parliament resolution of 7 July 2011 on Indonesia, including attacks on minorities, is one example of the pressure exerted by international actors. Since 2011, multiple similar statements have been issued by international actors in response to Indonesia’s violation of Freedom of Religion and Beliefs (FoRB). Such statements are not made in isolation; they are often informed and prompted by documentation, evidence and reports as well as briefing and lobbying efforts from local FoRB advocates.

International pressure, a widely used advocacy strategy, can be understood as an attempt by external actors to impose costs on governments violating FoRB with the purpose of formulating policies that will ensure the protection of FoRB (Petersen and Marshall, 2019; see also Alvian, 2023). Current scholarly discussions mainly focus on the effectiveness of such methods to affect changes (Hafner-Burton, 2008; Snyder, 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). Although the interplay of international actors and local advocates has been explored in some FoRB literature, the value and application of international pressure from the perspective of local advocates remain underdiscussed.

Reflecting upon this limitation, this policy brief examines how local advocates perceive and utilize international pressure in FoRB advocacy. Drawing from at least two violations of FoRB which garnered international attention – the killings of Ahmadiyah in Cikeusik in 2011 and the 2021 reform of the Indonesian penal code, interviews were conducted with local FoRB

advocates. Local FoRB advocates include national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the coalition of FoRB. Based on information from these interviews, this policy brief also recommends an optimal form of collaboration between local advocates and international actors in FoRB advocacy.

Evaluating International Pressure

International pressure is generally understood as mechanisms by which international actors hold the Indonesian government accountable for its failure in upholding and promoting FoRB locally. In this regard, the local advocates' understanding of international pressure tends to gravitate towards forms of reputational pressure, rather than military or economic pressure. Various methods of international reputational pressure are commonly utilized as part of advocacy strategies. They mainly observe and leverage the already-established UN mechanisms, such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the ICCPR Reporting Procedure. Through these mechanisms, local FoRB advocates play key roles in constructing CSO reports and findings (interview with Human Rights Working Group (HRWG), 9 June 2024).

Other mechanisms that local FoRB advocates exploit are in-person approaches, such as diplomatic briefings, audiences with ambassadors, and lobbying relevant stakeholders in Geneva (interview with YLBHI, 10 June 2024). Parallel to that, less formal and more mainstream mechanisms are also used by some advocates. Articles and statements published on their organizations' platforms amplify the issue domestically by leveraging popular sites to disseminate information that might not be adequately covered by domestic mainstream media (interview with HRW, 4 July 2024).

Local FoRB advocates are generally supportive of international pressure, underscoring that information and evidence presented to international communities should be supplied by local advocates. Instead of understanding “pressure” as an external imposition, local advocates regard it as a mechanism to hold the government accountable (interview with YLBHI, 10 June 2024). Framing it as an external force risks allowing such advocacy to be dismissed as foreign interference. In practice, the substance of international pressure often aligns with domestic

narratives, making the involvement of international actors integral to their advocacy –and, for some, a valued complement.

Although international pressure is widely acknowledged as an important component of advocacy, local FoRB advocates in Indonesia differ in how they see the value of and utilize international pressure in supporting their advocacy. First, international pressure is perceived as a vital instrument for heightening pressure against the state, especially when local pressure is not sufficient to compel a shift in policy. In this view, international engagement also serves as evidence that advocacy mechanisms are functioning, since international actors act upon information and documentation submitted through various multilateral channels (interview with ELSAM, 7 May 2024). Given that effective advocacy requires exhausting all available mechanisms, international pressure is considered integral to the overall strategy.

Historically, reform in Indonesia has often been attributed to strong civil movements, with justice frequently realized only when issues gain widespread public attention (interview with YLBHI, 10 June 2024). International pressure plays a role in amplifying cases, increasing the political cost to the government of the targeted states of maintaining problematic policies. For example, in the case of the killings of Ahmadiyah followers in 2011, domestic mainstream media provided limited and selective coverage that disproportionately placed blame on the Ahmadiyah, suggesting constraints in domestic advocacy. Responding to this, local FoRB advocates advised that the footage be sent to international mainstream media such as Al-Jazeera to ensure proportional coverage and to amplify the issue at the international level (interview with HRW, 4 July 2024).

The second position posits international pressure as an instrument for raising public awareness, but not directly intervening in the progress of local advocacy. International pressure on FoRB is considered a welcome initiative but does not require urgent endorsement. Although international pressure potentially contributes to amplifying advocacy, which could as a consequence raise the cost to the government for continuing its violations, it could create a more complex situation for the affected communities. Naming and shaming strategies or international

condemnation could provoke shamed parties, putting the affected communities at a greater risk (interview with PUSAD Paramadina, 3 June 2024; interview with CRCS, 5 July 2024).

In the context of FoRB, certain cases suggest that advocacy efforts may be co-opted by conservative groups, making it essential to examine who exerts “pressure” and to assess their underlying intentions. All forms of pressure cannot be assumed to share the same intent. Pressure exerted by the UN or by secular and neutral human rights groups may differ in nature and purpose from that exerted by exclusive religious organizations. Organizations advocating a broad range of issues pertinent to religious freedom, without showing partiality toward particular groups, and doing so consistently would be valid and credible. Such impartial and consistent advocacy suggests that human rights constitute the core of their advocacy rather than particular interests, thereby placing them on a higher moral standing (interview with CRCS, 5 July 2024). While international pressure can add value, it should not serve as a substitute for domestic advocacy strategy, especially since such pressure is often mobilized only in “populist” cases (interview with KontraS, 22 July 2024). Hence, a broad-based domestic coalition should remain the primary vehicle for advancing FoRB advocacy.

Differences in the utilization of international pressure can be partially attributed to the strategic orientation of each advocacy organization. Local FoRB advocates operate within varying structural conditions that shape their ability to engage with international mechanisms. Internationally based organizations, embedded in strong global networks, are structurally positioned to amplify otherwise unreported local issues to international audiences. National NGOs with robust regional and international networks often leverage them to scale up and scale out advocacy efforts, positioning domestic concerns within a transnational human rights discourse. Their infrastructure and capacities also enable in-person engagement with international counterparts, including targeted lobbying with stakeholders in Geneva (interview with YLBHI, 10 June 2024). These structural advantages and capacities enable them to coordinate key reporting processes, including submissions to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism and quadrennial evaluations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), thereby serving as focal points that bridge domestic advocacy and available international mechanisms.

Other than their diverse infrastructure and capacities, orientation and scope of work of an organization also shape its strategic approach to international pressure. Despite possessing strong regional and international networks, some national NGOs and research institutes whose work is oriented towards community assistance and research, place international mechanisms as a supplementary rather than as a primary focus (interview with Wahid Institute, 20 June 2024). As for organizations whose work centers on assisting affected communities, maintaining trust and ensuring the communities' safety is a fundamental priority. This emphasis necessitates advocacy strategies that minimize potential risk while aligning closely with the specific needs of the affected communities (interview with YSK, 11 June 2024). A similar rationale applies to organizations engaged in litigation and legal reform. For these actors, sustaining the credibility of their argument, particularly when defending cases in court, often requires distancing themselves from international pressure narratives. They adopt a positivist approach in which legal analysis is framed within the context of criminal offenses, with an emphasis on court practices and legal precedents. This approach is particularly important in sensitive cases that potentially provoke negative public sentiments. Furthermore, grounding their analysis on the Indonesian penal code rather than on discourses of international pressure, helps mitigate the perception of foreign interference (interview with ICJR, 24 June 2024). For example, during the 2019 reform of the Indonesian Penal Code, local advocates produced policy documents challenging problematic clauses. While they drew on international legal instruments such as the ICCPR for analytical reference, statements of pressure from international actors, albeit supportive to the grand scheme of advocacy, were deliberately omitted from the documents, which relied instead on domestic legal precedents and past case implementation to strengthen their position (interview with ICJR, 24 June 2024).

Recommendations

In evaluating international pressure, local FoRB advocates are largely supportive, seeing it as both a manifestation of their own agency and initiative, and as evidence that existing mechanisms function well. Local advocates' approaches, however, vary: some strategically

choose to actively seek and amplify such pressure, while others welcome them as extra reinforcement. These differences can be partially attributed to the distinct strategic approach of each organization, shaped by their infrastructure, capacities, orientation and scope of work. As outlined above, these differences work in complementary ways –maximizing the use of available advocacy channels while minimizing risks to affected communities. Nonetheless, there remains scope to strengthen collaboration between local FoRB advocates and the international community.

1. Strengthening the capacity of domestic NGOs

International pressure emerges from a range of local FoRB advocacy initiatives, whether through established formal mechanisms such as the UPR process and ICCPR reports, or informal mechanisms such as lobbying targeted stakeholders and diplomatic briefings to ambassadors. At present, this process is facilitated in part by institutionalized mechanisms through the HRWG (interview with HRWG, 9 June 2024). An additional pathway would be to strengthen the capacity of domestic NGOs to engage in international advocacy, thereby increasing the number of actors who can serve as intermediaries and bring cases to international forums. To mitigate the perception of foreign interference and the accusation of being foreign proxies, it is equally important to support domestic NGOs in public education efforts. Broader domestic voices can influence lawmakers more effectively, while reducing the risks associated with being labelled as foreign agents (interview with ICJR, 24 June 2024).

2. Strengthening domestic solidarity on amplified issues

Leveraging each organization's distinct strengths has shown how coordinated coalition between NGOs in Indonesia yields effective results. For example, in confronting one issue, each organization could target different areas to achieve a shared objective. Yayasan Satu Keadilan could focus on affected community assistance and support, KontraS with their security sector reform initiative could target the state apparatus in ensuring protection for the communities. Legal aid groups such as YLBHI dan LBH can lead in litigation efforts, while SEJUK (Serikat Jurnalis) spearhead media campaigns to mainstream counter-narratives. In addition, from the perspective of the affected

communities, unified messaging across NGOs is crucial to avoid confusion and maintain trust (interview with YSK, 11 June 2024).

3. Facilitating forums of international and regional networks

Several local FoRB advocates within the Indonesian Coalition for FoRB have demonstrated that coordinated regional and international forums contribute to enhancing advocacy strategy. Through regular meetings and scheduled conferences, these forums enable knowledge exchange, strategy synthesis, and coalition building (interview with PUSAD Paramadina, 3 June 2024; interview with CRCs, 5 July 2024; interview with Wahid Institute, 20 June 2024). Reflecting upon this, the international community could facilitate the expansion of such forums to include a diverse range of NGOs, particularly those with limited capacity to access international networks. Another alternative would be to leverage NGOs' existing partnerships with donors, as donors, often working with multiple partners, can facilitate meetings or forums with their extensive regional and international networks. Such forums can serve as a platform to foster the exchange of information and collaboration, enhancing the overall capacity of domestic NGOs (interview with YSK, 11 June 2024).

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