



Exposing Religious Fundamentalism at the UN: Alliance Defending Freedom and the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Since 2014, Muslims for Progressive Values has been a member of the United Nations Non-Governmental Organization Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief. We acknowledge with gratitude the Committee’s efforts to “promote and defend international agreements protecting freedom of religion or belief from within United Nations headquarters in New York City,”¹ and appreciate the Committee’s efforts to coordinate and convene a diverse group of civil society organizations, including several faith-based organizations, under the auspice of “upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, increasing tolerance, and eliminating discrimination based on religion or belief.”²

We also find importance and value in the platform the Committee provides for civil society organizations, including progressive and rights-affirming faith-based organizations, to engage the UN system and actors in potentially meaningful ways. It is crucial that these platforms for engagement, information sharing, and collaboration are preserved and sustained, particularly for human rights organizations that may not enjoy formal access to the UN in New York and Geneva.

For the same reasons MPV appreciates and finds value in being a member of the Committee, we must express our concern regarding the Committee’s elected leadership. We are deeply disturbed by the election of the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) to President of the Committee bureau. We are perhaps even more disturbed that ADF enjoys accreditation to the Economic and Social Council, as we affirm that the aims and objectives of ADF are in direct contradiction to the values and principles enshrined in the UDHR, the ICCPR, and the ICESCR—values and principles that undergird the UN as an institution and system.

It is no secret that ADF espouses anti-choice narratives and anti-LGBTQI hate and bigotry in both national and international policy spaces. The organization has been designated an anti-LGBTQI hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center for, inter alia:

- Engaging in “legal advocacy and trainings that have supported the recriminalization of homosexuality in the U.S. and criminalization abroad;”
- Defending “state-sanctioned sterilization of trans people abroad,” and
- Developing “‘religious liberty’ legislation and case law that would allow the denial of goods and services to LGBTQI people on the basis of religion.”³

¹ <https://www.unforb.org/about/>

² https://centerforinquiry.org/docs/opp/FORB_membership.pdf

³ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/alliance-defending-freedom>

Furthermore, ADF has:

- Offered legal advice to “anti-LGBTQI organizations in Belize” that were engaged in attempts to undermine the repeal of anti-sodomy laws in the country;
- “Partnered with groups that have ties to far-right Christian nationalism and white nationalism” in Romania; and
- Publicly defended anti-sodomy laws in Jamaica, exacerbating the normalization of discrimination and violence against LGBTQI people in the country.⁴

On 25 July of this year, a representative of ADF took the floor at the U.S. State Department’s Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom (24 - 26 July 2018, Washington, D.C.) to espouse anti-LGBTQI hate and dehumanize LGBTQI people, as well as to condemn the U.S. State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor’s imperatives to address and elevate the human rights situation of LGBTQI people internationally, framing these imperatives as incompatible with broader State Department initiatives to protect religious freedom and uphold other human rights.

ADF’s activities, including harmful and rights-diminishing domestic and international lobbying and legal advocacy campaigns, are an affront not only to the values and principles MPV upholds and advocates for at the UN, but also to those that each and every member of the Committee must unequivocally adhere to just to qualify for membership. Furthermore, ADF’s activities constitute absolute and clear “abuses [of] its [ECOSOC] status” as the organization has engaged “either directly or through its affiliates or representatives acting on its behalf, in a pattern of acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”⁵ Let us be clear, the mere fact that ADF has been accredited to the ECOSOC is an affront to the integrity of the entire UN system, and is exemplary of a more profound blight that it suffers from: acquiescence to and even complacency for potentially violent religious and cultural extremisms and fundamentalisms.

It is crucial that the international community, including internationally engaged civil society organizations, understand and locate ADF’s attempts to hijack international human rights and sustainable development mechanisms and spaces in the broader, global context of rising ultra-nationalisms and religious and cultural extremisms and fundamentalisms. It is crucial that these actors understand how ADF co-opts and skews human rights language to promote rights violating interpretations of normative human rights standards, especially regarding the principle of freedom of religion or belief. It is crucial that we come together to vociferously rebuke this interpretation of religious freedom as it is used to shield from accountability fundamentalist groups who seek institutional support to exercise their freedom to persecute, hate, violate human rights, and finance the exportation of rights-diminishing religious narratives abroad.

⁴ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/alliance-defending-freedom>

⁵ https://esango.un.org/civilsociety/documents/E_1996_31.pdf

We should be mature enough to understand that not all organizations that enjoy accreditation to the ECOSOC utilize the system to promote and advance international human rights norms and principles of sustainable development. Because ADF categorically contributes to and sponsors campaigns that directly undermine rights protections for people across the world, and because of their domestic promotion of erroneous and rights-diminishing interpretations of freedom of religion or belief, we request that ADF relinquish presidency of the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and that their membership be revoked.

Just as we have made it a duty to exemplify and hold accountable those actors that invoke Islam to justify a variety of rights violations in Muslims societies and communities across the world, we are compelled to expose ADF and any other actor engaged with the UN system who instrumentalizes human rights standards and principles, as well as narratives of religion or culture, to carry out sustained attacks on the universality of human rights and human dignity. MPV will not acquiesce in the face of such blatant hypocrisy, and we will continue to bring attention to this issue until it is resolved.
