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External and Internal Threats to the Freedom of Religion or Belief of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America

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Abstract: Indigenous Peoples in Latin America face a dual challenge of social vulnerability and violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Representing 8% of the region's population yet disproportionately affected by poverty, displacement, and health disparities, these communities also endure persistent religious discrimination—a challenge historically overlooked in policy and scholarship. This article advances the understanding of FoRB violations against Indigenous Peoples by distinguishing between external threats, targeting collective religious practices, and internal threats, undermining individual religious rights. Using a cross-case analysis of Paraguay, Mexico, and Colombia, this study illustrates the varied manifestations of these threats, relying on novel data from interviews, open-source platforms, and the Violent Incidents Database of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America and the International Institute for Religious Freedom. Focusing on Latin America as a “least likely case” for FoRB violations, the article highlights significant disparities in FoRB protections for Indigenous Peoples, challenging the assumption of Latin America as a region of relative religious freedom. By shedding light on these violations, the study underscores their broader implications for political stability and human rights. The findings call for greater attention to the intersections of religious freedom and Indigenous rights, offering a framework applicable to global contexts. This work also highlights the need for sustained data collection and targeted interventions to address these challenges effectively.



Academic Editors: Dură V. Nicolae and Cătălina Mittelu

Received: 12 December 2024

Revised: 29 January 2025

Accepted: 7 February 2025

Published: 8 February 2025

Citation: Petri, Dennis P., and Jason Klocek. 2025. External and Internal Threats to the Freedom of Religion or Belief of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America. *Religions* 16: 209. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020209>

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Keywords: freedom of religion or belief; Indigenous rights; Latin America; external threats; internal threats; religious discrimination; political stability

1. Introduction

Indigenous Peoples remain one of the most socially vulnerable groups in Latin America. They comprise approximately 50 million people, or 8 percent of the region's population (Davis-Castro 2023). Yet, Indigenous Peoples make up around 14 percent of the Latin American population living in poverty or extreme poverty (The World Bank 2015). They experience higher rates of landlessness and internal displacement (Acharya 2009). They remain especially susceptible to climate change (Kronik and Verner 2010). And they suffer poorer levels of health, including disproportionately high levels of maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition, and infectious diseases (Santos et al. 2022).

Policymakers, activists, and scholars have demonstrated increased concern for the varied forms of political, social, and economic marginalization faced by Indigenous Peoples in Latin America since the turn of the twenty-first century. For example, The United

Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was appointed in 2001, following a mandate of the UN Commission on Human Rights. Conspicuously overlooked until only the past few years, however, has been another equally pernicious and persistent threat to Indigenous Peoples in Latin America and beyond: freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) violations.

The relative disregard for religious discrimination towards Indigenous Peoples in Latin America is puzzling. For years, the issue was completely ignored, despite the alarm bells sounded by various grassroots faith organizations, as well as Indigenous interest groups (Reguart Segarra 2021; Alves 2020; Cleary and Steigenga 2004).

What is more, concern for global religious discrimination more broadly has become a topic of growing interest within policy circles. Government restrictions on religion have increased markedly in recent years, reaching an all-time high in 2021 (Majumdar and Crawford 2024). National and international organizations have commissioned dozens of reports and studies to better understand the causes and consequences of these trends (Klocek and Bledsoe 2022; Ghanea 2023; Schwabe 2022). Yet, Indigenous Peoples rarely, if at all, feature in these analyses.

Within just the past couple of years, the situation has begun to change with the international community showing signs of interest in the religious discrimination of Indigenous Peoples. The United Nations and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany both recently commissioned reports that assess global obstacles and opportunities facing Indigenous Peoples' FoRB (Shaheed 2022; Schwabe 2022). In 2023, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom published a report specifically on FoRB for Indigenous Peoples in Latin America (Petri et al. 2023). These reports have drawn attention to the overlooked challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples. However, there is still much we do not know about the scale and scope of FoRB violations against these communities.

This article picks up where recent policy reports leave off. It seeks to advance our understanding of FoRB violations against Indigenous Peoples through an analysis of the situation in Latin America. Theoretically, we distinguish between two types of threats to the FoRB of Indigenous Peoples: external threats, which target the collective dimension of FoRB, and internal threats, which undermine individual rights to FoRB. Most analyses focus on the former given external threats are easier to observe from afar (Scolnicov 2011).

Empirically, we adopt a cross-case research design to demonstrate the usefulness of this theoretical framework. We focus, in particular, on Paraguay, Mexico, and Colombia because they are illustrative of the types of violations under study and represent a range of socio-political and institutional contexts in the region. Paraguay exemplifies challenges in institutional capacity and widespread impunity related to corruption and political violence. Mexico has been deeply affected by systematic human rights violations, including enforced disappearances and violence against journalists, stemming largely from organized crime and state collusion. Colombia provides a case of prolonged internal conflict, transitional justice challenges, and ongoing risks to human rights defenders. Additionally, all three countries have large Indigenous populations in absolute numbers but relatively low percentages compared to countries such as Guatemala or Bolivia. This demographic dynamic allows for tensions related to Indigenous rights and marginalization to be more clearly observable without being overshadowed by demographic dominance. Furthermore, in Mexico and Colombia, there are advanced forms of Indigenous autonomy—de facto in the case of Mexico and de jure in Colombia—providing a distinctive lens through which to examine Indigenous-state relations. Together, these cases offer diversity in patterns of violations while reflecting common regional dynamics, making them typical for comparative analysis. These cases also provide a starting point for examining similar threats in

other countries, such as Bolivia or Venezuela, which could be included in future studies. The data for our case studies include novel interview and crossnational data, along with open-source data and secondary analyses.

We have three motives for focusing our empirical analysis specifically on Latin America. The first reason is it stands out as the least likely case for studying FoRB violations against Indigenous Peoples. Global studies of religious discrimination consistently point to Latin America as enjoying relatively higher levels of FoRB rights compared to other global regions (Majumdar and Crawford 2024; Fox 2020). We should, therefore, be less likely to find significant religious discrimination against Indigenous Peoples in this region compared to where FoRB violations of various types are more prevalent. Finding evidence to the contrary would underpin the value of more sustained attention to the topic (George and Bennett 2005, p. 253).

Data availability is the second reason for our focus on Latin America. Despite the development of global datasets on religious discrimination, we still lack reliable and systematic information on FoRB violations against Indigenous Peoples specifically. For this study, we draw on original data collected through semi-structured interviews and the Violent Incidents Database of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE) and the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF). These data enable us to systematically map FoRB violations in the region in a way we could not do for other parts of the world.

Our third motive is that Indigenous Peoples represent a significant proportion of the population in many Latin American countries (Davis-Castro 2023). More than 40% of the general population in Bolivia and Guatemala comprise Indigenous individuals. In Mexico, Panama, Chile, and Peru, Indigenous individuals make up more than 10% of the general population. As such, the region stands out as a critical case for understanding FoRB violations against Indigenous Peoples.

Understanding the types of FoRB violations faced by Indigenous Peoples in Latin America is important both within and beyond the region. Numerous studies demonstrate a link between religious repression and restrictions on other freedoms (Fox and Finke 2021; Sarkissian 2012; Grim and Finke 2011). Other analyses find religious discrimination and violence often reinforce one another (Henne and Klocek 2019; Basedau and Schaefer-Kehnert 2019; Akbaba and Taydas 2011; Saiya and Scime 2015; Saiya et al. 2024).

The remainder of this article proceeds in five parts. In the next section, we present a framework for understanding FoRB violations against Indigenous Peoples. This framework draws an analytical distinction between threats to religious freedom that are external and those that are internal, affecting the collective and individual dimensions of religious freedom, respectively. The third section describes our data collection methods. Section 4 applies the framework to case studies of the Ava Guaraní people in Paraguay and the Wixárika community in Mexico to illustrate the collective threats to the FoRB of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America. Section 5 provides empirical evidence of internal threats to the FoRB of Indigenous communities in Colombia and Mexico. The final concluding section discusses the findings from the case studies and considers the broader implications of the study.

2. A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB

In this study, we draw an analytical distinction between threats to the FoRB of Indigenous Peoples that are external and those that are internal, affecting the collective and individual dimensions of religious freedom, respectively. Our framework builds on a point of differentiation emphasized by Yvonne Donders in her work on cultural human

rights (Donders 2016). Donders points to a difference between three main types of cultural human rights: *community rights* that refer to collective entities, *communal rights* that apply to individuals recognized as members of a collective entity, and *individual rights with collective dimensions* that apply to individuals with no explicit reference to a collective entity, but whereby the enjoyment of the right has a clear collective dimension (Donders 2016, p. 89). This distinction draws attention to rights that may affect the collective as a whole versus individual members of a recognized collective.

To fully understand the threats facing the FoRB for Indigenous Peoples, it is crucial to consider the external–internal distinction. The external dimension involves safeguarding Indigenous Peoples from outside threats to their collective rights, an area that has increasingly attracted global attention. Over recent decades, significant international agreements have been established to protect these rights. For instance, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations 2007), the International Labour Organization’s Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169 (International Labour Organization 1989), and the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the Organization of American States (2016) all mark essential milestones in the effort to uphold Indigenous rights.

However, despite these important steps forward, challenges remain. Reguart Segarra (2021) underscores that protecting Indigenous Peoples’ collective religious rights remains a complex and ongoing struggle. While international protections have improved, they may still fall short of fully addressing the unique aspects of Indigenous Peoples’ cultural and religious needs. In addition, there is a substantial implementation gap by states.

The internal dimension brings a different set of challenges. Here, potential conflicts emerge between the rights of the group as a whole and the rights of individuals within it. Scholars have noted that Indigenous Peoples are not monolithic; within these groups, there can be minorities whose rights are often overlooked. Known as the “minority within the minority”, these individuals may not receive adequate protection under current international frameworks (Alves 2020; Scolnicov 2011; McDonald 1998; Ghanea and Xanthaki 2005; Pinto 2015; Kymlicka 1995). This lack of attention to intra-community diversity highlights a critical gap in the reach of both international law and policy approaches.

Ultimately, achieving full protection for the FoRB of Indigenous Peoples means looking at both sides: ensuring the group is shielded from external pressures, while also respecting and protecting the rights of individuals within the community. The remainder of this section outlines these two main types of threats, as well as highlights distinct challenges to evaluating the threats to Indigenous Peoples’ FoRB.

2.1. External Threats to Indigenous Peoples’ FoRB

External threats to Indigenous Peoples refer to risks of FoRB violations that may affect the Indigenous community as a collective (Sanders 1991, pp. 369–70; Wall 2007, pp. 236–37). The so-called third-generation debate on human rights seeks to provide specific protection for the rights of ethnic minorities and aims to preserve Indigenous cultures. Arguably, these rights have been under threat since colonial times and continue to be endangered by both state and non-state actors, including organized crime groups, paramilitaries, and multinational corporations. These violations might include preventing the group from carrying out its religious traditions—limiting access and guardianship over the sacred spaces, condoning (directly or indirectly) coercion to participate in other religious traditions and impeding the communal lifestyle of Indigenous communities.

External threats to the integrity and sacredness of Indigenous lands may be one of the clearest for outside observers to detect because of the involvement of outside actors. Attempts to mine natural resources from Indigenous lands in many cases are the cause of

altercations between the community and the state or bodies it imparts such rights upon (Arce and Nieto-Matiz 2024, pp. 2–3; Torres-Wong 2023, pp. 55–56). These activities infringe on the FoRB of Indigenous Peoples by threatening their ability to “preserve, protect, and access their sacred sites” (American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 16(2)). This is despite the existence of measures to mitigate natural resource extraction such as prior consultation with the community and compensation in Bolivia and Ecuador for example (it is also alluded to in ILO C169) (Radhuber and Radcliffe 2023, pp. 564–65).

External threats to Indigenous Peoples’ FoRB can also come from a variety of non-state actors. In Latin America, criminal organizations are a common source. Indigenous territories, by virtue of their de facto or de jure autonomy, are prime targets for such incursions and takeovers by criminal organizations seeking to harness the territory’s resources and population to achieve their goals. As a consequence, Indigenous lands may be mined for ore or cultivated to grow crops which can be processed to create drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and marijuana; constituents might be forced to become part of these organizations or otherwise assist in their activities under threats of violence (Murillo 2006, pp. 4–5; Van Uhm and Grigore 2021, pp. 496–98).

2.2. Internal Threats to Indigenous Peoples’ FoRB

Indigenous individuals also enjoy the basic human rights of non-Indigenous individuals. Internal threats to Indigenous Peoples refer to risks of FoRB violations that affect individuals or groups that do not adhere to the majority religion of their Indigenous community, because they converted away from their ancestral beliefs often to a variant of Evangelical Christianity or the Catholic Renewal Movement, or decide to adopt spiritual practices that are different from the majority of the Indigenous community. These “cultural dissidents” diverge from some cultural and religious traditions of their community following conversion, yet they continue to identify as Indigenous and maintain many aspects of their community’s worldview.

As a result of their differing beliefs, these groups often face serious security risks. Kovic (2007), Freston (2008), Alves (2020) and Petri (2023), among others, have documented how Indigenous leaders may impose penalties on them for non-compliance with community religious practices. They may face imprisonment, forced displacement, denial of access to essential resources like water, healthcare, and education, and even the confiscation of homes and farmland. In severe cases, they may experience torture, forced displacement, or death. In certain countries, missionary activities in Indigenous areas are restricted, citing concerns over cultural preservation and social cohesion. Indigenous converts may also be forced to participate in syncretic practices under the threat of reprisals against them or their families, infringing on their freedom to choose, change, or manifest their beliefs without coercion. Furthermore, these individuals might be compelled to participate in community religious events, which infringes on their right to conscientious objection. Parents in these groups may avoid sending their children to community schools to prevent them from learning Indigenous rites, facing fines or social exclusion as a result, which impacts their right to guide their children’s religious and moral education.

The “danger of unity”, which is observed in some Indigenous Peoples with a “unitary” conception of what a politically functional community should be, refers to a society where its members are expected to share the same language, traditions, dress, lifestyle, and convictions, as opposed to “pluralism” which valorizes and promotes freedom and diversity of elements (Buijs 2013). As scholars such as Sen (2006), Buijs (2013), Gurr (1993, 2000), Horowitz (2000), and Schlee (2008) have argued in different ways, rigid insistence on unity (or on a narrow understanding of identity) is often a recipe for violence. When the behavior of a member of a community is considered as deviating from the “collective conscience”, it

can cause various reactions. The various forms of violations of the religious freedom of these individuals have characteristics of cohesion, such as corrective measures to bring the individuals and their families back into the collective conscience, or outright acts of physical violence and exclusion from the community.

2.3. Challenges to Evaluating Indigenous Peoples' FoRB

The external–internal distinction for assessing threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB is, of course, an ideal-type typology. It aims to capture two broad types of FoRB threats in order to grasp general patterns while still recognizing nuance. While we have argued this distinction is particularly useful for understanding trends related to religious discrimination and repression of Indigenous Peoples, such a task does not come without its challenges.

Of particular note is that Indigenous communities tend to construe religion in a markedly different way than how it is commonly conceptualized in the Western world. It is holistic—encompassing all aspects of life, individual and communal—and relates not only to the group itself but also to the land they inhabit. The term used in the literature to describe the nature of this experience is “cosmovision” or “worldview”, a concept that covers “the structured vision in which members of a community coherently combine their notions about the environment in which they live, and about the cosmos where they place man’s life” (Villela Flores 2009). This is an integrative concept that structures the existence of a collectivity that identifies as a community and manifests itself through a set of beliefs, customs, and traditions transmitted between generations (Reguart Segarra 2020).

Each Indigenous community has developed a different worldview, which is not static; however, elements with a transversal meaning can be identified among communities of the continent. The sacredness of the territory, the extreme relevance of spirituality through rites and ceremonies, and the conception that all the elements of the world have life and spiritual significance stand out among the elements we can highlight for the analysis in this report. It should be noted that these elements of Indigenous religiosity are interrelated, forming a whole that can make complex the identification of the dimensions of religious freedom of these communities.

The way Indigenous Peoples construe and experience religion raises at least two issues with our framework. First, it might be argued that the external–internal distinction imposes an artificial separation given many Indigenous worldviews do not draw a formal segregation between the collective and the private, or individual (Pancho 2007). Our framework does not mean to capture an underlying dimension of Indigenous spirituality. Rather, it seeks to identify different perpetrators and targets of FoRB violations.

A second complication is that most Indigenous worldviews do not draw a distinction between the political and the religious, or religion and spirituality (Reguart Segarra 2021, p. 75; Pancho 2007). Considering that the Indigenous worldview irradiates almost all the activities of its members, disrupting social, cultural, and political elements, it can be easily confused or mixed with other factors. Hence, their cosmovision is often linked with the cultural identity of these communities or with the territory they traditionally occupy. As such, our framework seeks to include the recognition of the religious beliefs/practices of Indigenous Peoples in the most varied norms across the region, including the link between spiritual beliefs and practices, on the one hand, and land rights, on the other hand.

The categorization of missionary activity (proselytism) poses an additional challenge. Although it is arguably a legitimate expression of the right to religious freedom, it is often perceived as a threat to the preservation of Indigenous cultures and spirituality and is therefore construed as a threat to their religious freedom, which has been used to justify bans on proselytism in Indigenous communities. Such bans are intended to protect the religious freedom of the “minority” Indigenous community in the country, but arguably

also violate the religious freedom of the “minority-within-the-minority” (groups within the Indigenous community that adhere to other, non-traditional faiths). The balancing of the individual and collective dimensions of these rights is not easily solved. However, recent empirical studies at least suggest that restrictions on proselytization are associated with lower levels of civil and political rights in general and higher levels of religious hostility (Saiya et al. 2024; Sarkissian 2012). Proselytism, therefore, points out that the external–internal dichotomy can overlook connections between them. It is beyond the scope of this particular analysis to directly address this tension in the empirical analysis. It, therefore, remains an important area for additional research.

3. Methods

We adopt a cross-case research design to demonstrate the usefulness of our theoretical framework. The cases are meant to be viewed as plausibility probes into the prevalence of external and internal FoRB threats to Indigenous Peoples in Latin America, as well as the framework’s broader generalizability. Each case, therefore, aims to provide concrete examples of the framework’s application and to illustrate its empirical relevance, rather than provide an extensive test of the framework (Levy 2008; George and Bennett 2005).

We explore two case studies for each dimension. To shed light on the types and prevalence of collective threats to FoRB faced by Indigenous Peoples in Latin America, we focus on the Ava Guaraní people in Paraguay and the Wixárika community in Mexico. We explore broader trends in Mexico and Colombia to offer insight into internal threats in the region. These cases are selected as typical cases for each type of FoRB threat within Latin America, but also to demonstrate the range of FoRB violations in the region (Seawright and Gerring 2008).

The Ava Guaraní people in Paraguay and the Wixárika community in Mexico were selected as typical cases of collective threats to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Latin America due to their representative experiences of systemic violations targeting Indigenous communities. These communities face challenges such as displacement from ancestral lands, marginalization, and cultural suppression, which frequently intersect with FoRB violations. In Paraguay, the Ava Guaraní community has faced displacement due to agricultural expansion and land grabs, which undermines their ability to practice their religious and spiritual traditions tied to their ancestral land. This is emblematic of broader patterns in Latin America, where Indigenous communities often experience FoRB violations through land dispossession and state inaction, or even complicity, in protecting their rights. In Mexico, the Wixárika community exemplifies how internal threats manifest. They have faced severe pressures from organized crime groups and mining corporations, which not only encroach on their sacred sites but also target them with violence and coercion. This mirrors trends in the region where Indigenous communities are disproportionately vulnerable to violence and intimidation when defending their cultural and religious freedoms.

In exploring broader trends, Mexico and Colombia were chosen due to their high levels of religious plurality and the associated societal tensions. These examples were selected not only for their representativeness but also because they demonstrate the range of FoRB violations in the region, spanning both collective and internal dimensions. They highlight recurring themes of exclusion, marginalization, and conflict, making them particularly illustrative of the broader challenges faced by vulnerable groups in Latin America.

Due to the differing nature of collective and individual FoRB threats, we leveraged slightly different data collection methods in each set of case studies. To identify and document collective threats, we primarily relied on publicly available sources (e.g., news reports, civil society group reports, court case reviews, and the academic literature). Additionally,

we conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with human rights defenders, lawyers, Indigenous associations, and victims in 2022. Although these interviews are not directly cited in the case studies, they provided valuable background context by offering qualitative insights and firsthand perspectives that helped us interpret and contextualize the publicly available data. Specifically, the interviews clarified the lived experiences of victims and Indigenous associations, revealing patterns of collective threats to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) that may not have been fully captured in formal reports or academic literature. The interviews were crucial for cross-verifying publicly available sources, identifying recurring themes, and ensuring that the narratives presented in the case studies accurately reflected the realities faced by affected communities.

Encroachment on Indigenous lands, which are viewed in most Indigenous worldviews as sacred, is our main indicator of external threats. This can include land grabbing, environmental degradation, the presence of foreign missionaries, or other forms of external interference by both public and private actors. Such activities are, of course, analytically complex because such violations often overlap with other types of abuses against Indigenous Peoples (e.g., economic, social, and political discrimination). We focus on these because most Indigenous communities link these to FoRB violations, even if there is overlap with other types of discrimination (Reguart Segarra 2021, p. 75).

This analytic challenge underscores why we rely on a qualitative approach that considers the holistic nature of most Indigenous religions. Conventional FoRB datasets tend to adhere to a more Western, individualistic definition of religion. Yet, most Indigenous worldviews construe any threat to Indigenous territories as a direct or indirect threat to the religious freedom of the people living there, as the land is considered sacred. Additionally, incidents violating the collective dimension are difficult to assess through quantitative measures because these violations are not always reported by Indigenous Peoples themselves as violations of their religious freedom. Because the collective is targeted in ways that are real but diffuse, it is also unclear how to quantify the number of people affected. Moreover, in international litigation, including cases brought before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Indigenous communities themselves have only recently begun to refer to these threats as religious freedom violations (Arlettaz 2011; Ballón Quintanilla 2015). Thus, crossnational, quantitative analysis remains difficult given limited, and possibly skewed, data availability.

We explore individual threats to Indigenous Peoples through case studies of Mexico and Colombia. Here, we rely on similar qualitative evidence as the preceding section, as well as descriptive, quantitative data. We draw on the Violent Incidents Database of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America and the International Institute for Religious Freedom for the latter (Petri and Flores 2021; Petri and Wisdom 2024). This event-based database was designed to collect, record, and analyze public information on violent incidents related to religious freedom violations, initially in Latin America. We utilize this unique data source on internal threats to FoRB to estimate the number of people within Indigenous communities in selected Latin American states who experience violations of their right to religious freedom in the two cases under examination. The data cover the period of 2018 to 2023 and supplement our qualitative research.

We observed individual threats to FoRB based on harassment and/or violence towards individual members due to their religious convictions and resulting behaviors, often when they convert to a different religion from the majority of the community. These threats include restrictions on proselytizing, religious education, access to places of worship, and similar issues.

In theory, such restrictions could be observed by global FoRB violation datasets because they correspond to the types of variables typically tracked. However, that is not

yet the case. Three key reasons account for this absence. First, FoRB datasets generally use the state as the unit of analysis, preventing the detection of subnational variation. This is particularly problematic in the case of Indigenous communities in Latin America, which often have far-reaching regimes of political autonomy (de facto or de jure) and therefore experience a different panorama of religious discrimination compared to other parts of their country (Klocek and Petri 2023). Second, FoRB datasets do not usually distinguish between Indigenous communities as a group and individuals within those groups who may have converted to other religions. This distinction is crucial, as restrictions on religious expression within Indigenous communities affect a subset of individuals that is rarely analyzed separately, even in FoRB datasets that claim to track specific religious minorities. Third, related to the previous points, there is limited data availability, with few reports available. Qualitative studies on specific religious minorities within Indigenous communities do exist (Petri 2023; Kovic 2007; Cleary 2017), as well as reports by faith-based organizations that develop humanitarian interventions in these communities (many of these organizations participated in public hearings at the U.S. Congress on 17 September 2015 and at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on 28 November 2022). Given the fact that global FoRB violation datasets lack systematic information on individual threats, we focus our analysis on internal threats to two case studies covered in the VID.

4. External Threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB in Latin America

Indigenous Peoples in Latin America remain vulnerable to external threats to FoRB from both state and non-state actors. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, for instance, "has documented limitations on ancestral cultural, and religious practices, such as the ban on organizing community assemblies and celebrating novenas for the dead" (2019). A recent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom report on religious freedom for Indigenous Peoples in Latin America further notes a wide range of collective threats between 2018 and 2023 (Petri et al. 2023). In this section, we examine the experiences of the Ava Guaraní people in Paraguay and the Wixárika community in Mexico to shed light on these broader trends. Our analysis also illustrates how attention to the collective dimension of FoRB for Indigenous Peoples in selected Latin American countries reveals external threats not captured in many traditional analyses of FoRB violations.

4.1. External Threats Faced by the Ava Guaraní People in Paraguay

The Ava Guaraní people are one of the Indigenous Peoples recognized by the Constitution of Paraguay as existing prior to the formation of the State (Government of Paraguay 2011, Constitution of Paraguay 1992, rev. 2011, Articles 62–67). They are the second largest Indigenous group in Paraguay, with a total population of about 17,697. They comprise approximately 140 separate communities and 18 households. The Ava Guaraní people reside mainly in the departments of Canindeyú, Alto Paraná, and San Pedro; and to a lesser extent, in the departments of Caaguazú, Central, Amambay, and Concepción (Jara et al. 2014).

The Ava Guaraní people are composed of groups of households referred to as communities, under the mandate of an assembly and a "Paye" who also serves as a religious leader. The central story of Ava Guaraní mythology is *The Cycle of the Twins (the Sun and the Moon)* which reflects the socio-cultural norms and the symbolic appropriation of a universe destined for man. In Ava Guaraní mythology, plants and animals feature heavily in the origin of man and are linked to it (ITAIPIU Binacional 2020).

In recent years, the Ava Guaraní people have faced increasing levels of encroachment on their lands, most notably from the spillover effects of agrochemicals used on the agricultural monocultures that border the territories they inhabit. The contamination of Ava Guaraní land has led to the diminishing yields of crops for the communities living in these

areas, jeopardizing their ability to carry out traditional religious rituals and ultimately leading members of the Ava Guaraní people to consider relocation to other communities.

For example, the Indigenous Community of Campo Agua'ê, comprising around 200 people and located in the department of Canindeyú, district of Curuguaty, has suffered serious social and environmental impacts from the expansion of mechanized cultivation of transgenic seeds. The community's territory, located in an area of major agribusiness expansion, is surrounded by the large Brazilian companies Estancia Monte Verde, owned by Issos Greenfield International S.A., and Estancia Vy'aha, which are engaged in extensive monoculture of genetically modified soybean seeds. The massive fumigations carried out by both companies have failed to comply with environmental regulations, which establish environmental impact mitigation measures and impose obligations to leave live protective barriers between the application of pesticides and watercourses, roads, and towns, in order to avoid contamination. In violation of these regulations, both companies apply pesticides to their crops without protective barriers, right up to the houses, community school, access road to the community, and near the Curuguaty'y, Jejuí, and Lucio Kue rivers, which pass through the company lands before crossing the Ava Guaraní community. The Ava Guaraní people use these rivers for water, fishing, bathing, and washing their clothes.

Paraguay's failure to stop soy farms from poisoning Indigenous land has been noted by Radwin (2021), while Baumann et al. (2017) highlight significant deforestation and cattle expansion in the Paraguayan Chaco between 1987 and 2012; ITAIPU Binacional (2020) emphasized respect for the Ava Guaraní community's culture and spirituality; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2022) reported an alarming increase in pesticide use, compromising human rights, and the UN Human Rights Committee issued a decision on the case CCPR/C/132/D/2552/2015 (Pereira and Benega 2022).

The spillover effects from pesticides not only undermine the biological diversity and food subsistence of the Ava Guaraní territory. They also threaten ancestral cultural and religious practices associated with hunting, fishing, forest gathering, and Guaraní agroecology (*Views Adopted by the Committee under Article 5 (4) of the Optional Protocol, Concerning Communication No. 2552/2015*, 2021, pp. 2–4). For example, the Ava Guaraní people today face severe challenges in carrying out the ceremonial practices of baptism, *mitākaraí*, due to the disappearance of the construction materials for the dance house, *jerokyha*, which has traditionally been obtained from the forest (Pereira and Benega 2022). Environmental damage from nearby agrobusinesses has also nearly wiped out the avati corn variant used to make *kagüi chicha*, which is a fundamental and sacred ritual element in the ceremony. What is more, the community has also been unable to gather the wax necessary for ceremonial candles due to the massive extinction of wild bees, *jateí*, in the area.

As a consequence of not experiencing this ceremony, young Ava Guaraní children miss out on a crucial rite for the consolidation of their cultural identity. The effects of contaminated Indigenous land, however, go well beyond the individual; they weaken the community structure. The last religious leaders, *oporaiva*, no longer have apprentices because children need to undergo the *mitākaraí* rite (Pereira and Benega 2022). This threatens the preservation of the community's identity and customs. It also has led to members relocating, thereby breaking the connection between the community and the land, as well as between the members of the community themselves causing the community to break apart. As such, the spillover pollution effects from bordering agrobusinesses, like those detailed in the above example, disrupt the connection of the Ava Guaraní people to the land and threaten the Indigenous community as a collective.

4.2. External Threats Faced by the Wixárika Community in Mexico

The Wixárika community is located in the Sierra Madre Occidental, distributed among the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Zacatecas, and Durango. Their worldview is a mixture of the environment, society, and the sacred, or supernatural. In their tradition, the universe transcends the territorial limits of the mountains, and they give a spiritual meaning to different sites located in different regions, such as the Lake Chapala basin to the south, the mountain zone of Durango to the north, the plain desert to the east, and the Pacific Ocean to the west: places where sanctuaries are preserved, and sacred places where pilgrimages and offerings are made on a regular basis (Meza Haro 2019).

According to García-Weyandt (2020), one of the main religious rituals of the Wixárika people is the pilgrimage to Wirikuta, a sacred site located in Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí. The pilgrimage is an act of purification and an interior and spiritual journey. It extends over 550 km from the mountain region of Gran Nayar (Durango, Jalisco, and Nayarit) and the Wirikuta desert, through the states of Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí. It is estimated that this practice has been in existence for at least 200 years. The spiritual guides, the elders of the community, design a route towards the east on an axis that starts on the coasts of the Pacific Ocean, so that pilgrims reproduce the trajectory of an ancestral myth wherein men emerged from the sea and began the journey to Wirikuta to attend the birth of the Sun which illuminated the world for the first time at the peak of Cerro Quemado, near Real de Catorce (Torres 2020, pp. 5–6).

This pilgrimage is considered essential for the spiritual formation of its members. It is the initiation process for a group of men known as “jicareros” or *xuku’urikate*, in charge of ceremonial temples. They acquire the necessary skills to become a *mara’akate* or ritual specialist. In addition, it is important because this ceremonial activity is an indispensable condition for becoming a part of the political and religious hierarchy of each group. The purpose of the journey is to collect *híkuri* or peyote, a plant that grows in the San Luis Potosí desert, and is considered sacred and venerated by the Wixárika people. Peyote, whose origins date back to the birth of the solar deity, has a luminous or radiant sense. Its consumption is linked to the hallucinogenic properties of the cactus that places the initiates in a different reality, taking them to their deified ancestors (Millán et al. 2018, pp. 542–43).

The Wixárika community, however, faces a number of external threats that inhibit members from participating in this important ritual. For example, authorities have granted permissions for the construction of mining megaprojects for silver and other minerals near Wixárika (Ramos 2011). The installation of mining companies has affected free access to sacred sites, impeded the transit of pilgrims, and endangered subway water sources (Lorenzana Aguilar et al. 2017).

Torres (2020, p. 7) further points out how the pilgrimage has been disrupted, obstructed, and prevented by the Mexican authorities. First, she notes that the possession of *híkuri* or peyote, a psychotropic plant, implies a crime, although the Federal Penal Code, in article 195 bis-II, does not penalize the possession of peyote and hallucinogenic mushrooms when it can be presumed that they will be used in ceremonies of Indigenous communities. The state and municipal police ignore or omit this exception protected by law. Over time, as a measure to prevent these problems with the authorities, community members carry a letter from their traditional leaders who identify them as pilgrims and clarify that the law establishes a maximum amount of extraction, corresponding to 100 heads of peyote.

Another factor that has affected the free exercise of religious freedom of the Wixárika people is the presence of organized crime in their territories, which has caused much harassment to the communities in the state of Jalisco (Torres 2022). Criminal groups operate close to the people and control those entering and exiting the northern part of the state. This control and constant harassment affect the social fabric of the community, putting their

community development at risk. Also, some drug trafficking groups have begun to loot the sacred sites where peyote grows, destroying ceremonial centers and then commercializing the peyote heads (Rangel 2022).

5. Internal Threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB in Latin America

We now shift attention to internal threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB in parts of Latin America. We focus on two main sources: those exercised by internal and external agents of the community. Internal agents refer to members that self-identify as part of an Indigenous community. These members, especially religious leaders within a community, often enforce socio-religious norms. Members of Indigenous communities are often expected to share the same language, traditions, dress, lifestyle, and convictions, as opposed to "pluralism" which valorizes and promotes freedom and diversity of elements. Rigid insistence on unity by community members can lead to threats to individual FoRB. These often take the form of resistance towards Indigenous converts to other religions or practices that differ from those practiced by the majority of the community. External agents, in turn, include organized crime and private companies that directly affect the religious freedom of individuals in the communities, especially because of the religious role that these people play in the community.

To examine both types of internal threats, we focused on the experience of Indigenous communities in Mexico and Colombia. Our analysis draws on a range of secondary sources, similar to the previous section, but also includes descriptive data from the Violent Incidents Database. The VID sheds light on the number of people within Indigenous communities in both countries that experience FoRB violations between 2018 and 2023, in addition to being a unique source of information regarding the type and/or characteristics of these incidents. We first discuss general trends to internal threats in both countries. This is followed by examples of specific Indigenous communities to illustrate these country-level trends.

5.1. Internal Threats in Mexico and Colombia: General Trends

While the constitutions of Colombia and Mexico provide all persons the right to FoRB, internal threats to practicing this right for Indigenous Peoples have steadily increased over the past half-decade. As shown in Table 1, the VID documents 1674 violations to the individual dimension of Indigenous Peoples' FoRB in Colombia and 927 violations in Mexico. In both countries, the total number of violations has generally risen over the past few years. Between 2018 and 2022, the total number of violations in Colombia per year has nearly quadrupled. We also observe variation in the levels of violence each year. In Colombia, incidents seem to have dramatically declined in 2023. In Mexico, the most violent year was 2021, with nearly five times the number of incidents recorded than the other five years for which incidents were reported.

Table 1. Total number of internal FoRB violations in Colombia and Mexico (2018–2023).

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Colombia	122	302	289	403	462	96	1674
Mexico	43	104	79	510	89	102	927

The VID also documents variation in the internal threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB in both countries. Table 2 details 13 distinct types of internal threats covered in the VID. Each type of violation has been documented in Colombia, while Indigenous communities in Mexico have experienced 10 of these variants. In both countries, the most pressing internal threat to Indigenous Peoples appears to be forced migration (i.e., being forced to leave home or country), with nearly three-quarters of documented cases falling into

this category. Approximately three-quarters of incidents between 2018 and 2023 fall into this category for each country. Arrests/detentions and attacks on property stand out as a secondary tier of common internal threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB in Colombia and Mexico, with each type accounting for around 10% of overall threats, respectively. Other forms of harassment or abuse accounts are also not uncommon. Killings, abductions, and desecration of places of worship do occur, but remain relatively rare.

Table 2. Internal FoRB violations by nature of incident in Colombia and Mexico (2018–2023).

Violation Type	Colombia	Mexico
Killings	18	2
(Attempts) to destroy, vandalize, or desecrate places of worship or religious buildings	8	4
Closed places of worship or religious buildings	3	0
Arrests/detentions	57	111
Sentences	19	3
Abductions	16	3
Sexual assaults/harassment	20	0
Forced marriages	2	0
Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse)	200	62
Attacked houses/property of faith adherents	53	90
Attacked shops, businesses or institutions of faith adherents	18	1
Forced to leave home	1201	643
Forced to leave country	60	40

Drawing on the VID, we have also been able to identify the primary perpetrator responsible for a number of incidents. Table 3 illustrates these trends. Organized crime stands out as the most significant source of internal threats in Colombia, with ethnic group leaders also being identified as the main perpetrators in a substantial number of cases. In Mexico, ethnic group leaders seem to be the driving force behind those incidents for which a perpetrator could be clearly identified, accounting for more than three-quarters of those cases.

Table 3. Perpetrators of internal FoRB violations in Colombia and Mexico (2018–2023).

Perpetrator Type	Colombia	Mexico
Ethnic group leaders	45	73
Extended family/normal citizens	4	8
Government officials	2	2
Organized crime/revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	68	9
Unknown	4	1

5.2. Internal Threats: The Nasa Community in Colombia

While the VID documents general patterns of internal threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB, the experience of the Nasa community in Colombia offers additional insight into the experience of Indigenous Peoples in Colombia.

The Nasa ethnic group, also known as Páez, is the second-largest Indigenous group in terms of size in Colombia made up of about more than a quarter million people. The Nasa live in 72 resguardos, which were created mostly during the colonial era, and 34 other types of Indigenous communities, located in the southwestern highlands of Colombia in an area known as Tierradentro. While the vast majority of the Nasa live in the Department of Cauca, they are also spread across the neighboring departments of Caquetá, Huila, Meta, Putumayo, Tolima, and Valle del Cauca (Urrea-Giraldo 2019, p. 29).

The Nasa live in rural communities and work mainly in agriculture and cattle raising. Weaving is also an important activity in the lives of the Nasa. This activity connects them to their mythological beliefs of the creation of the world. The belief system of the Nasa is built around a syncretic mix of Catholic and Indigenous traditions and symbols (Sopo 2023, pp. 214, 244–45). Although the mainstream religious beliefs of the Nasa include elements of Catholicism, the religion of the Nasa can more accurately be described as a form of pre-Columbian religiosity with Catholic influences. When a member of the Nasa converts to Evangelical Christianity, this thus constitutes a very radical change.

Conversion to Christianity—understood as the conscious decision to abandon traditional Indigenous religious practices, often after joining an Evangelical denomination—is a major cause of human rights abuses in the Nasa *resguardos*. Indeed, *indígenas* who convert to Christianity and abandon their ancestral beliefs face aggressive opposition from local religious leaders and community members. As Lía Salomé Sánchez explains, “In many Indigenous communities, including the Arhuaca, Kogui and Nasa communities, converts to Christianity who subsequently reject their ancestral traditions are isolated, displaced, uprooted, threatened, punished and their fundamental rights are violated” (Petri 2020, p. 144).

Numerous examples of hostilities against Christians can be cited, including cases of denial of health services, forced displacement, and physical mistreatment. In one case, a group of 139 Indigenous Christians were required by Indigenous leaders to sign a document renouncing their beliefs. If they refused, they would face violent consequences, including torture and exclusion of access to agricultural lands (Petri 2023, pp. 125–26). Overwhelmed by these threats, these Indigenous Christians decided to sign the document, but some of them later decided to remove their names from it. In April 2013, they were forced to flee the *resguardo* and now live in El Pital village in makeshift tents made of wood and plastic on a piece of land where the owner of a farm lets them live temporarily (Petri 2020, p. 144).

Such cases are part of a pattern. As a humanitarian worker reported, “In Cauca, almost every day there are cases of Indigenous persecution. In recent days, houses of Christians were burned down, and Christians were displaced. [I also] received a report that two believers are punished by the Indigenous authorities with imprisonment for opposing their ancestral practices” (Petri 2020, pp. 114–15).

In addition, Nasa Christian converts who wish to advocate for change and promote their worldviews—through the building of churches, establishing alternative educational institutions (that are in line with the new beliefs and reject the syncretic teachings promoted by the community), or through political participation and advocacy—receive threats and are the targets of varying degrees of harassment that might be accompanied by physical violence (Petri 2023, pp. 126–28).

The presence of criminal organizations within Nasa Indigenous territories can also be another factor in the violation of the basic rights of constituents by the collective (Murillo 2006). The community may choose to disassociate with individuals who, perhaps through coercion, chose to take part in illicit activities, thus preventing them from taking part in community spiritual activities and enjoying the rights and protections granted to them through the community; however, the community might choose to invoke corporal punishment for this association (Petri 2023, p. 125).

5.3. Internal Threats: The Tzotzil and Tzeltal Communities in Mexico

The Tzotzil and Tzeltal communities, who are of Mayan origin and reside in the Mexican state of Chiapas, further illustrate the types of internal threats faced by Indigenous Peoples in Latin America. As with most Mayan cultures, the conceptions and values in these communities revolve around corn. They are of the view that human life is conceived thanks

to corn, which is also considered a source of social prestige or *am'tel* ("to work"), In other words, a man who knows how to work is the one who has an abundance of corn. To access a prestigious position within the traditional hierarchy, a person must have enough corn to feed the authorities, his assistants, and his family for a year (Chojnacki 2016, pp. 41–42).

In the religious system of the Tzotzil, cultural elements of Indigenous divinities are mixed with elements of the Catholic religion, the main religion adopted by these communities. On one side, there is a religious hierarchy linked to the cult of the Catholic saints, and on the other, there are a certain number of *j'iloletik* (healers), who have the function of interceding for men in the supernatural world. They are the ones who perform individual healings and lead collective ceremonies.

Among their fundamental forms of divinity are the *totilme'iletik* ("fathers-mothers"), ancestral gods appreciated as Indigenous who live in sacred places, grant sustenance, and reward or punish. A series of sacred symbols are associated with these deities, and the use of the cross is frequently observed in their ancestral rituals, conceived as a door that leads to the gods and a proof of the deep syncretism that characterizes them (Köhler 2007).

The ceremonial life of the community is organized around the Catholic saints, and during the year, "patron saint feasts" are celebrated, with a deep meaning of community unity. The festivals, organized by the *mayordomos* and their *alfereces*, constitute the community's annual ritual cycle. Throughout the year, festivities are held in the Tzeltal and Tzotzil municipalities of Mitontic, Chamula, Chenalhó, Chalchihuitán, Zinacantán, San Cristóbal, Teopisca, Huixtán, and Pantelhó, among others.

Harassment of converts away from the form of Christianity practiced by the Tzotzil generally occurs when these individuals refuse to participate in traditional ceremonies, such as patron saint festivals. Under those circumstances, traditional leaders use their authority to impose penalties, inclusive of high fines or prison sentences as a dissuasive message to converts or their families. If the refusal to participate in these ceremonies persists, the authorities have even cut off basic services, such as water and electricity, as well as stoning their houses, forcing them to abandon their homes and seek refuge with relatives, or migrate to the cities (Domínguez 2021).

The harassment from traditional authorities is not directed exclusively against Christians of other denominations. Cases where Catholic lay movements, such as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, experienced the same rejection and social exclusion have also been reported (Kovic 2007). The common factor between evangelical converts and those who congregate in movements, like the aforementioned, is the interpretation they make of the Word of God and how they replicate this in their behavior. For example, as Roberto Martínez mentions in an interview, refusing to consume alcohol as part of a syncretic ceremonial practice imposed by the traditional authorities exposes them to exclusion from the community for causing division and dissolving the unity of the Indigenous community (Uribe Cortez and Martínez Velasco 2012).

6. Concluding Discussion

This article offered theory and evidence to advance our understanding of FoRB violations against Indigenous Peoples in Latin America. Building on an emerging consensus within international human rights legal circles, we drew an analytical distinction between threats to the FoRB of Indigenous Peoples that are external and those that are internal. This distinction draws attention to FoRB violations that may affect the collective as a whole versus individual members of a recognized group. Applying the framework in Latin America, we found that Indigenous Peoples in the region continue to face significant challenges at both levels.

The framework also exposed distinct types and drivers of violations not typically captured through global datasets or conventional analyses that seek to document and address FoRB violations. Regarding the collective dimension, the most widespread forms of FoRB violations threaten the integrity and sacredness of Indigenous lands. As illustrated through case studies of the Ava Guaraní people in Paraguay and the Wixárika community in Mexico, these violations undermine Indigenous Peoples' ability to perform the religious and cultural rituals that underpin social structures and bonds. Over time, FoRB violations that hinder Indigenous Peoples' ability to preserve, protect, and/or access their sacred lands has led to social fragmentation, with individuals relocating to other communities or parts of the country.

Large-scale agribusinesses and organized crime stand out as two main drivers of external threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB in Latin America. The former are associated with land-grabbing of Indigenous lands, oftentimes with the complicity of the local and/or national government. For instance, the construction of mining megaprojects for silver and other minerals near Wixárika sacred sites has impeded the movement of pilgrims and endangered water sources. Our case study of the Ava Guaraní people in Paraguay also shows how the mere presence of these agricultural monocultures on the border of Indigenous lands can lead to FoRB violations. The spillover effects from the pesticides used by these companies not only undermine the biological diversity and food subsistence of the Ava Guaraní territory; they also threaten ancestral cultural and religious practices. Criminal organizations that operate in close proximity to Indigenous communities also impede access to sacred lands by regulating movement in the Sierra Madre Occidental region of Mexico. They also have contributed to the desecration of sacred lands through looting of peyote.

Individual, or internal, threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB, at least in Mexico and Colombia, center around four key forms: forced displacement, arrests/detentions, attacks on property, and other forms of harassment and intimidation. Forced displacement remains the dominant type by some measure. In both countries we examined, these violations appear to have generally increased over the past half-decade.

Studies of the Nasa community in Colombia and the Tzotzil and Tzeltal communities in Mexico underscore how conversion and proselytism, in particular, remain contentious issues in Indigenous communities and are oft-cited reasons for harassment and intimidation. As such, ethnic group leaders stand out as a primary driver of internal threats to Indigenous Peoples' FoRB. Drawing on their charismatic authority, traditional leaders impose social and physical penalties on those who fail to conform to religious norms or participate in communal rituals. Organized crime is another prominent perpetrator of FoRB violations, especially in Colombia. Members of the Nasa community, for instance, face social and religious exclusion for participation in criminal organizations, even if those undertakings were coerced.

Our study is, of course, not without its limitations. There remain distinct challenges to studying FoRB violations against Indigenous challenges, as discussed above. We also restricted this study to one geographical region, with a specific focus on Indigenous communities in Paraguay, Colombia, and Mexico. Our aim was to illustrate the plausibility of the external–internal distinction and uncover potential patterns. However, the degree to which our theory and empirics apply more broadly remains an area for future research. For instance, additional scholarship could consider how Indigenous Peoples in Brazil, the Andes, or other regions face distinct challenges shaped by geography, proximity to urban areas, and social dimensions like gender.

A similar caution applies to the data we collected. While we made efforts to triangulate findings through crossnational, interview, and secondary data sources, we do not claim

that we have provided an exhaustive catalog of FoRB violations for a specific community or country. More in-depth studies of each case could help to corroborate our findings and possibly uncover additional dynamics, especially by considering within-case variation. Future scholarship, for example, could explore the diversity of threats across different ecological, geographical, and social contexts within Colombia, Paraguay, Mexico, and other countries in Latin America.

Still, our findings have important implications for how we think about FoRB violations against Indigenous Peoples in Latin America, but also religious discrimination more broadly. Existing global datasets provide important insights into a range of FoRB violations, as well as the steady increase in religious discrimination across the globe. However, other types of FoRB violations remain obscured because these datasets tend to adhere to a more Western, individualistic definition of religion. Future research would do well to continue to expand our aperture through inductive approaches that seek to understand and document FoRB violations as understood by specific sets of communities.

This study also emphasizes the need for additional study of Indigenous Peoples, specifically. They represent a significant proportion of the population in many regions; however, we still lack reliable and systematic information on FoRB violations against these communities. To advance our understanding, more detailed qualitative and quantitative studies could bring to light other patterns of FoRB violations against these groups. One promising avenue for the latter is the potential to expand the Violent Incidents Database to other countries and regions, in order to facilitate global comparisons. Additional research could explore the mechanisms that contribute to certain types of religious repression or discrimination.

Finally, our study raises important questions about how best to protect and preserve the FoRB of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous autonomy is often presented as a way to protect the ancestral religious beliefs of Indigenous Peoples. Notwithstanding the significance of this legal protection, our research underscores how the FoRB of Indigenous Peoples in Latin America continues to be challenged at both collective and individual levels.

A critical question for future research, therefore, is how best to address these persistent external and internal threats. One important problem for protecting the collective dimension of FoRB highlighted in our case studies of communities in Paraguay and Mexico remains the enforcement of legal protections. Strengthening international mechanisms for protecting human rights may offer one option for addressing this issue, though this comes with its own challenges in terms of balancing collective and individual rights.

To address internal threats, governments might consider offering incentives for liberal reforms inside Indigenous communities. There are antecedents of successful progressive lobbies in other Indigenous communities that could be a source of inspiration. Cleary's (2017) research on changes in women's political rights in Indigenous communities in the state of Oaxaca in Mexico revealed that the formalization of Indigenous uses and customs, which was previously used to restrict the right of women to vote and to stand for election, created space for liberal activists to expand female political participation. There are also models for the accommodation of differences in polities with deep societal cleavages that future research could explore, especially the conditions under which certain models are more or less effective (Kymlicka 1995; Lijphart 2004; Vargas and Petri 2008). While it is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate these policy options, the theory and empirics offered do invite scholars and policymakers alike to rethink how we understand and address FoRB violations against Indigenous and other communities.

Author Contributions: All authors contributed equally to this manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The Violent Incidents Database (VID) is available at www.violentincidents.com.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, the International Institute for Religious Freedom, Teresa Flores, Marcela Bordón and Noam Sellam for their contributions to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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