

RELIGION AND POWER

The Comparative Dynamics of Political Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia

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Abstract: This study compares the dynamics of political Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia, focusing on the interaction between Islamic discourses and state–religion relations. Using a qualitative comparative approach, it combines political culture and media analysis with interviews involving representatives of major Islamic organizations, including the Front Persatuan Islam, PBNU, Forum Umat Islam, UMNO, and PAS. The findings reveal contrasting trajectories of political Islam. In Indonesia, decentralization enables diverse Islamic expressions, with Islamism emerging primarily from civil society and often driven by public dissatisfaction with government. In Malaysia, political Islam is shaped by state institutions and Malay-Muslim nationalism, allowing Islamic elites to consolidate political dominance through legal and policy frameworks. These contrasting patterns demonstrate how political Islam functions both as a strategy of political power and a challenge to democratic resilience. The study contributes to debates on religion–politics relations in post-colonial democracies and the evolving role of Islamic authority in the public sphere.

Keywords: Indonesia, Malaysia, political Islam, religion and power.

Introduction

Islam and politics always are tangled in many areas of Islamic world in one way or another. In the resurgence of Islamic conservatism in recent decades, the lure of making Islam more

apparent in public sphere is at all times high. Islam always finds its way to make its trace in politics through legislation, pop culture, digital platforms and many other avenues. Although Indonesia and Malaysia are in the periphery of Islamic world, political Islam is on the rise again, especially after the fall of authoritarian regime of Soeharto in Indonesia and the end of Barisan Nasional dominance in Malaysia. Global events, such as September 11 Attack, ISIS resurgence, Palestine-Israel conflict, and Arab Spring also contribute in one way or another to the rise of political Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia.

In Indonesia, Political Islam has been a defining element in political landscape since the pre-independence period. Efforts to establish Islam as the foundation of the state were raised during the BPUPKI sessions but were rejected in favor of a national compromise that produced Pancasila. Although the idea of an Islamic state was not realized, debates over Islam's position within the state continued, culminating in the Constitutional Assembly before its dissolution by Sukarno in 1959.¹ Political Islam also manifested in violent forms through the DI/TII movements in various regions.² During the New Order, Suharto's regime suppressed all potential political powers, including Islamic movements through tight control, but spaces of resistance remained alive through a few avenues, such as *da'wa* networks by conservative Muslims.³⁴ Political strategy shifted in the 1990s when Suharto established ICMI (Association of Muslim Intellectuals) to embrace Muslim elites in an effort to securing support from Muslim urban middle class.^{5, 6}

The 1998 Reformasi which marked the end of the authoritarian regime of Soeharto, opened new spaces for the expression of political Islam. Not only Islamic political parties and muslim organizations, new

¹ Ahmad Syafii Maarif, *Islam dalam Bingkai Keindonesiaan dan Kemanusiaan: Sebuah Refleksi Sejarah* (Jakarta: Mizan, 2006), 24.

² Chiara Formichi, *Islam and The Making of The Nation: Kartosuwiryo and Political Islam in 20th century Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV, 2012), 3-6.

³ Noorhadi Hasan, "Islamic Militancy and Resentment against State Domination in Indonesia," G. Fealy & S. White (eds.), *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2019), 171-192.

⁴ Robert W. Hefner, "Public Islam and the Problem of Democratization," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 4 (2001), 491-514.

⁵ Rober W Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 56.

⁶ Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007), 78.

conservative groups such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Front Pembela Islam (FPI), and Tarbiyah advocated for Islamic state ideals.⁷ Meanwhile, political parties like PKS and PBB brought the Jakarta Charter agenda, which mandated the obligation of Muslims to perform their religious duties, into parliament. Over the past two decades, Islamic identity politics has shifted from the periphery to the mainstream, especially during the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections.⁸ This phenomenon raises questions about the resilience of Islamic identity politics and how the state responds to it.

Unlike its neighbor, Indonesia, Malaysia exhibits a more prominent form of Islamism-or political Islamic movement-driven by state institutionalization that privileges Islam. Manifested in both the constitution and state policies, this institutionalization grants preferential treatment to Malay-Muslims, rooted in the historical recognition of Islam's contribution to the anti-colonial struggle.⁹ Notably, this framework allowed Muslims to secure substantial political and economic advantages, a trajectory that intensified during the 1970s and under the administration of Mahathir Mohamad.

Beyond local historical factors, external events such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic State of Pakistan further inspired the state to institutionalize Islamic values as a guiding framework for socio-political life. Constitutionally, Islam holds a revered position as the official state religion, with the Sultan serving as the supreme leader of the states and the official head of Islam. Another constitutional privilege links ethnicity with religion, stipulating that all Malays must be Muslim. Consequently, Malays receive special rights regarding education and land ownership, meaning that advancements for the Malay community directly consolidate the socio-political position of Muslims.¹⁰ This dynamic was further reinforced

⁷ Masdar Hilmy, *Islamism and Democracy in Indonesia: Piety and Pragmatism* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2010), 27.

⁸ Z Qodir, "Conservative Turn and Political Identity: Challenges to Democracy in Indonesia after Presidential Election 2019," *Identities* 32, no. 3 (2025): 370–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2024.2415220>.

⁹ Ahmad Abdul Hamid, "Shifting Trends of Islamism and Islamist Practices in Malaysia, 1957–2017," *Southeast Asian Studies* 7 (December 1, 2018): 363–90, https://doi.org/10.20495/seas.7.3_363.

¹⁰ James Chin, "Malaysia: Identity Politics, The Rise of Political Islam and Ketuanan Melayu Islam," *Religion and Identity Politics* (2021), https://doi.org/10.1142/97898112-35504_0004.

during the Mahathir era through the New Economic Policy (NEP), which systematically strengthened the economic and political hegemony of the Malay-Muslim population.¹¹

This study aims to examine these dynamics in Indonesia by comparing them with the Malaysian case. This research analyzes: (1) how political Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia responds to challenges of democracy and pluralism; (2) the strategies of Islamist actors within democratic spaces; and (3) the potential for mitigating religious identity polarization in Southeast Asia. The theoretical framework integrates theories of political Islam, identity politics, and critical discourse analysis to explore patterns, differences, and mitigation strategies against resulting polarization.

This study differs from previous research by emphasizing the construction of discourse on the ‘secular state’ as a perceived threat and the political engagement of Islamists in Indonesia. Hamayotsu states that Islamic identity politics, often associated with Islamism, is an expression of collective aspirations to instill Islamic values in the public sphere, including the implementation of sharia and the establishing an Islamic state.¹² In Indonesia, these aspirations have historical roots dating back to the colonial period, when Islamic groups rejected the colonial legal system and demanded a greater role for Islam in the post-independence state.¹³ Although studies on Islamism in Indonesia are growing, an important gaps remain, namely the lack of comparative studies with Malaysia, despite both countries having similar demographic and colonial backgrounds but very different state-religion relations.

This study employs a qualitative-comparative approach to examine patterns of interaction between religion and political power in Indonesia and Malaysia over the past decade. In addition to critical discourse analysis of digital media content, official policy documents, and organizational fatwas, primary field data were collected through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews involving ten key

¹¹ Rev Sing, “The Malay-Muslim Identity and the Public Roles of Non-Muslims: A Social Identity Approach,” *Journal of Religion and Public Life* 2 (2025): 51–66, <https://doi.org/10.70600/427463olituv>.

¹² Kikue Hamayotsu, “The Political Rise of the Prosperous Justice Party in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: Examining the Political,” *Asian Survey* 51, no. 5 (2011), 971–992.

¹³ Jajat Burhanudin, *Ulama dan Kekuasaan: Pergumulan Elite Muslim dalam Sejarah Indonesia* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2012), 178.

informants from across the spectrum of Islamist and mainstream movements in both countries. In Indonesia, field interviews were conducted with prominent figures from moderate Muslims of Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU), some Islamist Muslims of Front Pembela Islam (FPI) and Forum Umat Islam (FUI), as well as secular Muslim intellectuals from Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL). Meanwhile, primary data from Malaysia were obtained through interviews with moderate-modernist Muslims within the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the Islamist Muslims within Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), and Muslim intellectuals. The collected comparative data were then analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to map how religious identities are structurally articulated to secure contemporary political legitimacy.

Contemporary Dynamics of Political Islam in Indonesia: Populism, Factionalism, and State Legal Prosecution

The contemporary dynamics of political Islam in Indonesia have evolved beyond the classic ideological dichotomy between nationalist-secular and formalist-Islamist camps. Political Islam during Reformasi period has shifted significantly toward pragmatic political accommodation intertwined with the rise of Islamic populism in the digital realm. As critically analyzed by Jati, contemporary Islamic populism in Indonesia reflects a new articulation strategy that utilizes the personal piety of urban middle-class Muslims.¹⁴ Through the pervasive penetration of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, populist movements have successfully converted individual religious sentiments into massive, collective political expressions aimed at challenging secular elites perceived as corrupt or detached from the *ummah's* interests.¹⁵ This phenomenon demonstrates that Islamism no longer operates linearly through conventional cadre networks but instead manifests as fluid waves of populist piety that possess substantial electoral leverage.

¹⁴ Wasisto Raharjo Jati, "Critical Analysis of Islamic Populism: Insights from an Indonesian Perspective," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 18, no. 1 (2024), 85–110.

¹⁵ J Situmorang et al., "Ummah Narrative in Indonesian Politics: Between Emotional Mobilization and the Rationality of Democracy and Its Impact," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 15, no. 2 (2025): 257–87, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v15i2.257-287>.

At the internal of political parties, profound fragmentation has occurred as a consequence of the tension between political pragmatism and ideological puritanism. One of the most prominent manifestations of this phenomenon is the chronic factionalism within an Islamist party of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). As explored by Siregar et al this internal friction ultimately culminated in the birth of the Gerakan Indonesia Arah Baru (Garbi), which subsequently transmuted into the Gelora Party.¹⁶ This split reflects a shifting orientation among Islamist elites; one faction opts to adapt to pragmatic-inclusive electoral demands, while another faction remains firmly committed to maintaining the party's puritanical ideological identity. The internal polarization within Islamic parties reinforces the argument that the umbrella of political Islam in Indonesia has never been monolithic but is continuously fragmented by tactical electoral interests.

Concurrently, the state's response toward the rising pressure of radical or highly vocal Islamist groups has undergone a radical transformation through prosecution. The Indonesian government no longer prioritizes soft accommodation, turning instead to legal instruments to suppress the operational space of groups deemed to undermine the state ideology of Pancasila. This trend of law enforcement aligns with the banning of organizations that threat national ideology and unity.¹⁷ The ruling regime utilizes bureaucratic legality and organizational dissolution (such as the banning of HTI and FPI) to curb discourses surrounding the caliphate or the formalization of sharia. While effective in maintaining short-term political stability and containing a long-term threat of ideological subversion,¹⁸ this defensive state approach triggers serious debates regarding the future of civil liberties and the boundaries of democracy in Indonesia.

The 212 Movement and Populist Islamic Mobilization

¹⁶ Sarah Siregar S, et al., "Factionalisation in the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera): Underlying Reasons for the Emergence of the New Direction of the Indonesia Movement (Garbi)," *Al-Jami'ah: Jurnal Studi Islam* 62, no. 1 (2024), 153–83

¹⁷ Waskito Wibowo W, et al., "Min al-Ḥall ilā al-Qawmiyyah: Fiḥ as-Siyāsah li al-Qam'i al-Jadalī Tijāh al-Jamā'at al-Islāmiyyah bi Indūnisiyā," *Al-Ihkam Jurnal Hukum dan Pranata Sosial* 20, no. 1 (2025), 284–311.

¹⁸ Arun Anand, "Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Political Doctrine, Global Reach, and Challenge to the International Order," *Middle East Quarterly* 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.47620/-GGGM2165>.

The momentum of these vocal Islamist networks reached its zenith at the eve of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election (*Pilkada DKI Jakarta*).^{19,20} An Islamist groups loose coalition consisting of the Front Pembela Islam (FPI), Forum Umat Islam (FUI), and the Majelis Intelektual dan Ulama Muda Indonesia (MIUMI) collectively formed the National Movement to Guard the Fatwa of the Indonesian Ulema Council (GNPF-MUI) to demand the imprisonment of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) for alleged blasphemy by mass rallying on 2 of December 2016 in Jakarta. This mobilization, which crystallized as the '1212 Islamist Movement', represented an accumulation of deep-seated grievances against the incumbent regime. As stated by Shobri Lubis, Chairman of the Front Persatuan Islam (FPI):

“Our disappointment with Ahok had been brewing for a long time as Governor of DKI Jakarta since he replaced Joko Widodo (Jokowi) who run for presidency. We consider Ahok a duplicate of Jokowi, whose policies do not favor Islam. Jokowi has often disadvantaged Islam; it can be said that the Jokowi administration is secular and its existence is supported by secular groups, including religious figures with liberal views.”²¹

The Islamist groups ('1212 Islamist Group') opposed Joko Widodo have strengthened the economic and political position of non-Muslim groups at the expense of Muslim majority. As stated by Al Khaththath, Secretary-General of the Forum Umat Islam:

“In the current era of Joko Widodo's administration, the 'octopus' of Chinese business tycoons has become too expansive, from upstream to downstream, so that there is not a single field free from the control of yellow-skinned' businessmen. It is difficult to find alignment between Jokowi and the Islamic economy. Chinese dominance is very strong in the economy. The government should make regulations so that goods from China do not enter; the government must provide opportunities for local entrepreneurs to strive.”²²

¹⁹ Moch. Mubarak Muharam, et al., “The Opposition of Kelompok Islam 1212 (1212 Islamic Group) to Joko Widodo's Government: Strengthening or Weakening Democracy?,” *Journal of Civics and Moral Studies* 9, no. 1 (2024), 1-13.

²⁰ Nourah Ifinah Shabirah, et.al., “The Movement and Political Controversy of the Islamic Defenders Front in Indonesia,” *Journal of Political Islam* 1, no. 2 (2025), 3-12.

²¹ Interview with Shobri Lubis, March 26, 2019

²² Interview with Al Khaththath, March 29, 2019

The anti-china sentiment due to chinese dominance in economy convinced the 212 Islamist Group that social injustice had occurred against indigenous Muslims. According to Bachtiar Natsir, Secretary-General of the MIUMI, there is monopoly and economic inequality, the control of natural resources by a handful of tycoons, reinforced by mutual cooperation between financiers, rulers, and politics, resulting poverty among indigenous Muslims everywhere. In this context, Muslims must unite to fight this injustice.²³ Jokowi was considered to have the courage to strengthen the position of non-Muslims because he was supported by moderate Islamic groups. Moderate Islamic groups, especially Nahdlatul Ulama, have been accused by the 212 Islamist Group of not practicing true Islam. As stated by Said Aqil Siradj, Chairman of the Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU):

“They (the 212 Group) accused us of deviating from the religion, even labeling us as secular. They often do not trust other groups that are not aligned with their thinking. (However) we are completely unaffected by their accusations, because NU believes that its teachings respect differences. They also accused us of being close to Joko Widodo, which made them increasingly hostile toward him.”²⁴

In addition, the 212 Islamist Group felt that the desire to fully practice Islamic teachings often encountered obstacles during Joko Widodo's administration, which again backed by traditional Muslims of Nahdlatul Ulama, as stated by Slamet Ma'arif, Chairman of the Persaudaraan Alumni 212.²⁵ In the same vein, another islamist figure, Yusuf Martak, Chairman of the Gerakan Pengawal Fatwa Ulama, asserts that blasphemy case of Ahok was the entry point for series of massive protests against Jokowi in 2016 and 2017.²⁶ The extraordinary response from Muslims to the movement against Ahok gave confidence to Islamist groups that their movement was heading toward success in weakening the secular government led by Jokowi, as well as a sign of Islamic revival and unity in Indonesia. They also believed that the Islamic revival in the world could begin with the glory of Islam in Indonesia.

²³ Interview with Bachtiar Natsir, March 28, 2019

²⁴ Interview with Said Aqil Siradj, May 4, 2019

²⁵ Interview with Slamet Ma'arif, March 28, 2019

²⁶ Interview with Yusuf Martak, May 9, 2019

The 212 Islamist Group movement became a symbol of resistance against Jokowi, as well as a momentum to counterbalance the dominance of moderate Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, whose leadership advocate moderation and pluralism. An example for this is Amin's idea of Dar al-Mithaq which emphasizes Indonesia as neither Islamic state nor enemy state, but a state based on social contract.²⁷ Although the 212 Islamist Group is loosely organized and lacks strong institutional cohesion, these Islamist groups remain relevant and visible in the public sphere, due to political (religious) momentum and the use of social media and online platforms.²⁸ The background of administrators and sympathizers of 'the 212 Islamist Group' who come from universities with science and technology majors makes them accustomed to using information technology to achieve their goals. This assertion is verified by Ulil Abshar Abdallah, a prominent figure of the Jaringan Islam Liberal and Nahdlatul Ulama stating that they are active players on social media, especially Twitter, thereby controlling the public sphere in cyberspace.²⁹ This contradicts Hamayotsu's argument that Islamic movements require a cohesive and institutionalized framework to survive in modern politics.³⁰

In the Indonesian case, the influence of Islamism is sustained not by internal coherence, but by a combination of grassroots mobilization, social media amplification, and the relative lack of effective counter-narratives. Furthermore, this study challenges the optimistic views of scholars such as Ali who imagined that progressive Islamic movements like Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL) could effectively limit the spread of Islamist ideology. In practice, the moderate Islamic public voice has been counterbalanced by Islamist groups, through online media and social media. As argued by Buehler although Indonesian Islamic culture is generally moderate, this moderation is

²⁷ Ahmad Musadad et al., "BEYOND SHARIA AND SECULARISM: Political Pluralism and Multiculturalism in the Concept of Dār Al-Mithāq," *JOURNAL OF INDONESIAN ISLAM*; Vol 19, No 2 (2025), December 4, 2025, 532, <https://jiiis.uinsa.ac.id/index.php/JIIs/article/view/30971>.

²⁸ Neng Vivie Nurfauziah Rukmini, Norhafezah Yusof, and Ali Nurdin, "Islamic Political Narratives in the Digital Era: A Comparative Analysis of Malaysian and Indonesian Islamic Parties," *QIJS* 13, no. 2 (2015), 1-46.

²⁹ Interview with Ulil Abshar Abdallah, May 6, 2019

³⁰ Kikue Hamayotsu, "Islam and Nation Building in Southeast Asia: Malaysia and Indonesia in Comparative Perspective," *Pacific Affairs* 75 (2002), 353-375.

often passive, and many of its adherents remain silent in the face of more vocal and assertive Islamist movements.³¹

Transnational Influences and Local-Level Islamism

The rise of Islamism in Indonesia must also be understood in the context of transnational political currents. Studies by Dunne,³² Wedeen,³³ and Burhani,³⁴ reveal that the Arab Spring, which initially aimed to dismantle authoritarianism and corruption in the Middle East, inadvertently became an inspiration for Islamic militancy in Indonesia. Although the Arab Spring was envisioned as a democratic breakthrough, it motivated Indonesian Islamist groups to intensify their mobilization. As observed by Maher, Islamist movements worldwide have harnessed revolutionary energy for religious radicalization purposes, rather than democratic consolidation.³⁵ In this context, Islamist groups in Indonesia, albeit with different manifestation and strategy, often question the benefit of democratic system for Muslims. Ismail Yusanto, Spokesperson for Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, compared democracy with Islam; like his counterparts in many other countries,³⁶ he argues that democracy is incompatible with Islam, and democracy is even considered to marginalize Islam.³⁷ However, the majority islamists do consider political participation including by forming of political party and voting in elections as the only avenue of advancing Islamic goals. The most prominent manifestation of political Islamism in post-Reformasi Indonesia is through the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), which reached its electoral peak in 2009. Rooted in the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, PKS

³¹ Michael Buehler, *The Politics of Shari'a Law: Islamist Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 105.

³² Michele Dunne, "After the Arab Spring: Caught in History's Crosswinds," *Journal Democracy* 26, no. 4 (2015), 75-79.

³³ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 103

³⁴ Ahmad Nadjib Burhani, "Islam Nusantara as a Promising Response to Religious Intolerance and Radicalism," *Trends in Southeast Asia* 2 (2018), 1-28.

³⁵ Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), 56.

³⁶ Anand, "Hizb Ut-Tahrir: Political Doctrine.

³⁷ Interview with Ismail Yusanto, October 7, 2019

promotes an agenda of moral purification and sharia implementation, while rejecting local syncretic religious practices.³⁸

The position of PKS reflects the tension between Indonesian Islamic pluralism and ideological homogenization. PKS's desire to get pushback from traditional Islamic authorities like Nahdlatul Ulama and kyai-pesantrens who have played an important role in defending secular arrangement of Indonesia with its Pancasila and spreading moderate Islam through cultural and educational approaches based on local traditions.³⁹ However, moderate Islamic discourse still faces challenges from segments of society that support the institutionalization of Islam as a political system. The tension between democracy supporters and ISIS sympathizers has become a hallmark of Indonesian Muslim politics. Although Islamist activism has increased, Islamic parties have failed to gain significant electoral support to date. This failure is related to their history of compromise with the New Order regime and Muslim intellectual delegitimization.⁴⁰

Unlike countries such as Saudi Arabia, where Islamism gained legitimacy through anti-colonial struggle, Islamist groups in Indonesia lack such historical credibility. Instead, fundamental contributions to Indonesian independence came from other Muslim groups of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah.⁴¹ This historical context underscores the paradox that although moderate Islam played an important role in shaping the nation's foundations, it is now being

³⁸ Ahmad Nur Fuad, Hamnis Syafaq, and Rofhani, "The Identity of Political Islam in a Democratic Regime: The Ideology of the Prosperious Justice Party (PKS), Indonesia and the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey," *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 20, no. 2 (2026), 185-211; Roel Meijer, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2012), 79.

³⁹ Mark Woodward, Inayah Rohmaniyah, Ali Amin and Diana Coleman, "Muslim Education, Celebrating Islam and Having Fun as Counter-Radicalization Strategies in Indonesia," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 4, no. 4 (2010), 1-15; Charlene Tan, "Educative Tradition and the Politics of Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Comparative Education Journal* 50, no. 3 (2014), 347-361; Florian Pohl, "Islamic Education and Civil Society: Reflection on the Pesantren Tradition in Contemporary Indonesia," *Comparative Education Review* 50, no. 3 (2006), 389-409.

⁴⁰ Burhani, "Islam Nusantara as a Promising Response to Religious Intolerance, 1-28

⁴¹ Alexander R. Arifianto, "Moderate Islamic Organisations and Contestation Over Political Theology: The Responses by Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah Towards Islamism in Indonesia," G. Facal, E Lafaye de Micheaux, and A. Norén-Nilsson (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Political Norms in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024) https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-9655-1_20.

challenged by more radical elements seeking to redefine Islam's place in Indonesian society.

State Institutionalization, Ethno-Religious Politics, and the Dialectics of Pluralism in Malaysia

In contrast to the dynamics in Indonesia, which are largely scattered across civil society, the contestation of political Islam in Malaysia is deeply rooted in the state's rigid institutionalization of religious authority.⁴² In Malaysia, Islam is not merely a private affair or a belief system; rather, it constitutes a fierce 'discursive battlefield' where the boundaries of religion and politics are strictly institutionalized by the state.⁴³ The state's efforts to bureaucratize religious authority under federal agencies like JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) and state-level religious councils under the Sultans have generated an acute structural dilemma. This state monopoly over Islam triggers a tension between preserving the hegemonic supremacy of Malay-Muslims on the one hand, and maintaining inclusive governance for a multiethnic and multi-religious society on the other.⁴⁴ Consequently, the interpretation of religion in the public sphere is highly restrictive and heavily dominated by the state's official narrative.⁴⁵

Political developments, particularly after the collapse of the Barisan Nasional's (BN) absolute dominance in the 2018 General Election (GE14) and the subsequent political instability, reveal that the interaction between Race, Religion, and Royalty-collectively known as the 3R formula-has mutated into an electoral commodity highly vulnerable to exploitation.⁴⁶ When single-party stability crumbled,

⁴² Norshahril Saat, *The State, Ulama and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2025), 156.

⁴³ Walid Jumlat Abdullah, *Debating Islam: Religion and Politics in Malaysia* (London: Routledge Handbook of Islam in Southeast Asia, 2022), 341–51.

⁴⁴ Syaza Shukri, "Islamist Civilizationism in Malaysia," *Religions Journal* 14, no. 2 (2023), 1–15.

⁴⁵ Muhammad Asad Latif, "Political struggle of Malaysia and Islam: moderating and radicalizing the state, society, and religion alternately (1957–2023)," *Discover Global Society* 2, no. 4 (2024).

⁴⁶ Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid and N. Zawawi, "The Interplay of Race, Religion and Royalty in Contemporary Malaysian Politics," K. Rajandran and C. Lee (eds.), *Discursive Approaches to Politics in Malaysia* vol 18 (Singapore: Springer, Asia in Transition, 2023), 17–32.

political actors from Malay-Muslim parties like PAS and certain factions within UMNO reproduced 3R sentiments as a rhetorical weapon. Sociological anxieties that the special privileges of the Malays and the sanctity of Islam were ‘under threat’ by non-Muslim forces were deliberately fanned to mobilize the emotions of grassroots voters for political legitimacy.

Historical Roots and the Rise of Political Islam

The push toward political Islamization in Malaysia became particularly pronounced during the 1970s. One of the most significant events was the 1979 Iranian Revolution, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, which demonstrated the possibility of overthrowing a Western-backed secular regime and establishing a theocratic Islamic state, including in Malaysia, where it sparked aspirations for greater integration of Islamic values into political and social life.⁴⁷ These transnational and influence of Pakistan's identity frequently served as a point of reference for Malaysian politicians in insisting that Islam should function not only as a personal faith but also as a comprehensive framework for political governance, legal systems, and public morality.⁴⁸ The Malaysian Constitution explicitly institutionalizes Malay identity as an entity that must speak Malay, adhere to Malay customs, and profess the religion of Islam.⁴⁹ Legal prohibitions on apostasy from Islam for ethnic Malays reinforce the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and citizenship. The position of the Sultans as heads of Islam in each state provides constitutional and symbolic legitimacy that strengthens the institutionalization of Islam.⁵⁰

The ethnic riots of May 13, 1969, marked a turning point in national politics. The government responded through the New Economic Policy (NEP), which not only aimed to reduce inter-ethnic inequality but also strengthened the political position of Malay-

⁴⁷ Amy L. Freedman, “Political Viability, Contestation and Power: Islam and Politics in Indonesia and Malaysia,” *Politics and Religion Journal* 2, no. 1 (2009), 100 – 127.

⁴⁸ Gregory Fealy, *Islamisation and Politics in Southeast Asia: The Contrasting Cases of Malaysia and Indonesia* (Australia: Australian National University and Routledge Curzon, 2005), 25-30.

⁴⁹ John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1991).

⁵⁰ Nordin Hussin, “Religious Governance and Educational Institutions in Malaysia: Contestations and Reforms,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 4 (2020), 301–318.

Muslims.⁵¹ During the Mahathir Mohamad era (1980s-1990s), the state launched an Islamization project that embedded Islamic values into the legal system, education, economy, and media.⁵² The state played an active role in shaping Islamic discourse through national media, establishing diplomatic relations with Muslim-majority countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, and strengthening global solidarity on the Palestinian issue.⁵³

The Iranian and Pakistani models provided strong inspiration for Islamic movements in Malaysia, particularly PAS, to push for the implementation of Islamic sharia and constitutional reform.⁵⁴ Islamization also manifests in symbolic and confrontational forms, such as the destruction of non-Muslim places of worship and anti-religion rhetoric. Islamic activism is institutionalized in three main forms: militant groups, missionary efforts to non-Muslims-often with state support-and movements emphasizing increased Islamic religious observance.

Ethnicity, Religion, and State Institutionalization

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with an estimated population of approximately 34 million in 2024. The three largest ethnic groups are Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Malays comprise about 50% of the population, Chinese about 30%, and Indians about 15%, with smaller minorities including Arabs and Pakistanis. This composition, which places ethnic Malays as the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, does not necessarily mean they dominate all aspects of life. This condition of economic and political inequality, in certain contexts, gives rise to a desire to change regulations and the constitution, aiming to give meaning to special rights for ethnic Malays. In this context, Sonny Zulhuda, Regional Executive Council Chairman of the Association of Muslim Scholars of Malaysia, stated:

⁵¹ Kua Kia Soong Kua, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* (Selangor: Suaram Komunikasi, 2007), 56.

⁵² Joseph Chin Yong Liow, "Exigency or Expediency? Contextualizing Political Islam and the PAS Challenge in Malaysian Politics," *Third World Quarterly Journal* 25, no. 2 (2004), 359–372.

⁵³ Anidah Robani, *The Palestinian Issue: A Malaysian Perspectives (1957–2003)* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2009), 90.

⁵⁴ Mohd. Faizal Musa and Siti Syazwani Zainal Abidin, *Longer-term External Conditions Behind Legal Conservatism in Malaysian Islam* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute 2021).

“The Malaysian Constitution historically often specifically addresses the issue of ethnic Malays, including defining Malay identity through a three-part criterion: a Malay must speak Malay, adhere to Malay customs, and profess Islam. Because in social and political terms, Malays are more privileged, especially Malay elites. The issue of ethnic Malay privileges is often narrated by parties such as UMNO and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party/PAS; in this case, UMNO is more Malay-oriented, while PAS focuses more on Islamic issues. And it must be acknowledged, when ethnic Malays are more advantaged, the quantity of Islam in Malaysia is also advantaged.”⁵⁵

The phenomenon of ethnic and religious interconnectedness seeks to understand political Islam in Malaysia, which differs somewhat from Indonesia. The advancement of Islam can be projected to benefit a specific ethnicity, namely ethnic Malays. Similarly, when ethnic Malays gain certain privileges in various fields, it is easily assumed to benefit Islam. In this framework, Islamic identity is not only spiritual but also ethnic and legal, connecting religion with the state and ethnicity in ways that are institutionalized and protected by law.⁵⁶

Malaysia's legal framework prohibits efforts to convert ethnic Malays from Islam, as it is considered a legal violation at the same time encourage non-Malays to convert to Islam. This legal configuration serves as a protective mechanism for Islam and a broader political strategy to maintain Malay-Muslim identity supremacy.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the institutional power of Islam is reinforced by the fact that Malaysian state Sultans also serve as the heads of Islam in their respective territories, providing Islam with royal and constitutional backing unmatched in many other Muslim-majority countries as stated by Sonny Zulhuda.

The Iranian Revolution then became ideological fuel for Islamic revival in Malaysia, triggering a wave of Islamization policies during the 1980s and 1990s under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Although scholars still disagree about the success of Malaysia's Islamization

⁵⁵ Interview with Sonny Zulhuda, November 10, 2024

⁵⁶ Joseph Chin Yong Liow, *Piety and Politics: Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 135.

⁵⁷ Myengkyo Seo, “Religious Conversion and Citizenship: The Rise of Limbo Between Secular and Islamic Citizenship in Malaysia,” *Journal of Church and State* 65, no. 3 (2023): 307–17, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csad002>.

efforts in creating a true Islamic state, it is clear that these efforts have fundamentally transformed the political landscape. As argued by Liow, Malaysia has undergone ‘institutional Islamization’, where Islamic values are increasingly embedded in public policy, law, and educational curricula although the country maintains a plural legal system encompassing both civil and sharia courts.⁵⁸

The Islamization of political and governmental spheres in Malaysia has been significantly facilitated by the constitutional and institutional framework that prioritizes Islam as the state religion. This prioritization is reflected in various state mechanisms that actively promote Islamic values and institutions, particularly concerning the interests of the Malay-Muslim majority. Among these mechanisms are the ease of establishing Islamic educational institutions, state-supported Islamic economic initiatives, and the direct allocation of government funds and resources for *da’wa* activities.

The state also plays a key role in strengthening Islamic discourse by providing prominent Muslim figures access to public platforms such as national television and radio. Malaysian political leaders, including figures from both ruling and opposition parties, consistently express strong opposition to Israeli actions against Palestine through public statements, positioning themselves as defenders of global Muslim interests. As revealed by Adi, a member of Nahdlatul Ulama Malaysia:

“The calls from Islamic leaders in Malaysia regarding the struggle to defend Palestine can attract sympathy from Malaysian citizens, and Malaysia ultimately receives recognition from the international community as a country that cares about Palestine's fate. More or less, the Palestinian issue has added to the Islamness of some Malay people.”⁵⁹

PAS Politics and Electoral Contestation

The rise of political Islam was also driven by socio-economic transformations within the Malay population, with many Malays enrolling in universities, especially those influenced by reformist Islamic thought. A new generation of educated Malay Muslims began

⁵⁸ Joseph Chin Yong Liow, “Political Islam in Malaysia: Problematising Discourse and Practice in the UMNO–PAS Islamisation Race,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics Journal* 42, no. 2 (2004), 184–205.

⁵⁹ Interview with Adi, November 11, 2024

to reinterpret their religious and political identities. As more Malays enrolled in universities, particularly those influenced by reformist Islamic thought, a new generation of educated Malay Muslims began reinterpreting their religious and political identities. In universities, students are often exposed to Islamist ideologies from Western-educated lecturers, especially from Britain, who are influenced by Islamic diaspora activism. The Iranian Revolution and the establishment of Pakistan as an Islamic state inspired Islamic movements in Malaysia, particularly Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), to push its only reason to exist for the implementation of Islamic law and constitutional reform. Political Islamic aspirations are not limited to electoral participation but encompass the legal and moral transformation of the state based on sharia.⁶⁰ Although not yet realized as an Islamic state, its influence is felt in public policy and increasing symbolic expressions of Islamic dominance, such as vandalism of Hindu temples and anti-Christian rhetoric.

In states such as Kelantan, Terengganu, and Kedah, PAS victories have enabled the implementation of Islam-based policies such as gambling bans, alcohol regulation, and closure of entertainment venues. Kelantan, with its Middle Eastern-educated religious elite, is known as the 'Veranda of Mecca', marking the consolidation of Islamic conservatism within Malaysia's sub-national political system. According to Amirul Amran, a UMNO activist:

"PAS is clearly seeking to Islamize the states it wins. The regulations produced in states like Terengganu, etc., reflect PAS's political ideology that wants to make all rules based on Islamic law. But the question is whether Islamic sharia can be applied extremely in Malaysia; that remains a question, because not all Malays agree."⁶¹

PAS is also engaged in grassroots voter mobilization using religious messages, asserting that voting for PAS is a religious obligation for Muslims strengthening the party's legitimacy among observant Muslim voters insisting that PAS's existence is for the benefit of Islam. thus, leaving no option for Muslims but to vote for

⁶⁰ Ihsan Yilmaz and Syaza Shukri, *Seven Decades of PAS in Malaysian Politics BT - Islamist Parties and Power in Democratic Nation-States: A Comparative Analysis of Six Muslim-Majority Countries* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2024), 49–90, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-4343-8_3.

⁶¹ Interview with Amirul Amran, November 13, 2024

PAS. In their efforts to make their movement a reflection of Islamic interests, PAS actively calls for the Islamization of governance, namely the appointment of Islamic figures to government positions.⁶² In addition, PAS cadres are also actively involved in the management of state-owned Islamic educational institutions. PAS not only raises discourse about Islam, shows concern and involvement in Islamic education, but they also try to always be close to the Islamic community; for this purpose, they place PAS offices (secretariats) at the sub-district level near mosques.

PAS, as a party that positions itself to represent Islamic interests, has an obligation to maintain the good name of political Islam, so they continue to build a positive image, both when in power and as opposition. Khairul Faizi Ahmal Kamal, Deputy Chairman of PAS in Johor states:

“When we were part of the ruling party, the government provided budgets for parliamentary member activities, even though they were different from the government. But now, when the ruling coalition is led by Anwar Ibrahim, opposition parliament members are not given budgets for activities. Anwar Ibrahim only provides budgets if parliament members do not oppose government policies, including those related to religion, race, and Royalty. We do not follow whatever the government wants; for example, we often advocate for clean governance, free from corruption, and a Malaysia free from LGBT’.”⁶³

Kamal said PAS does not want to be uprooted from its founding roots, namely as a political party that wants to represent Islamic interests; the party's political goal is to implement Islamic values in governance. Therefore, when there is discourse that contradicts the Islamic struggle, the party always opposes such detrimental discourse. Therefore, PAS disagrees with the government's desire to eliminate public discussion of issues of Religion, Race, and Royalty. PAS realizes that if they remain passive on these issues, their existence will become dim in Malaysia.

The goals of Islamic politics initiated by PAS has advanced, especially in the last five years, obviously with some notes. The party

⁶² Azmil Tayeb and Meredith L Weiss, “Islamist Government in Malaysia under PAS: Ideology, Policies, and Competition,” *Asian Studies Review* 49, no. 2 (2025): 234–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2024.2383682>.

⁶³ Interview with Khairul Faizi Ahmal Kamal, November 14, 2024

which in coalition with BERSATU came second in the 2022 general election (GE15) which was depicted as a highly polarizing and political instability.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, this progress indicates that the political Islamization offered by PAS has gained approval from a portion of Malaysian citizens, especially ethnic Malays. The closeness of ethnic Malays to PAS is inseparable, as this ethnic group believes that if Islam wins, their social, political, and economic fortunes will improve; conversely, if Islam is marginalized, the future of the Malay ethnic group will be bleak. The closer relationship between ethnic Malays and PAS is also undeniable, as ethnic Malays are beginning to lose hope of surviving in UMNO,⁶⁵ whose coalition came third in the 15th general election in 2022, because several party elites holding government positions have been involved in corruption scandals.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, the religious construction promoted by PAS as a representation of the Islamist movement is often criticized by other parties, as it is considered to create divisions.⁶⁷ PAS is accused by several parties of forming opinions that do not match reality, including the issue of Christianization by Anwar Ibrahim's Pakatan Harapan coalition. Not only that, local government (state) policies controlled by PAS are considered incompatible with efforts to create prosperity for citizens. Critics from rival parties, such as UMNO, have voiced concerns about PAS-controlled states.⁶⁸ A young activist from UMNO, Dollah, complained that Kelantan, the stronghold of PAS, remains one of the poorest states in Malaysia. Investors are reluctant to engage because of strict religious regulations. This gives the impression

⁶⁴ Abdul Rashid Moten, "Research Note: The 15th General Elections in Malaysia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 45, no. 1 (2023), 111–27.

⁶⁵ Aaron Denison Deivasagayam, "Down but Not Out (Yet): Evaluating the Transition of UMNO's Political Dominance in Malaysia," *Asian Politics & Policy* 17, no. 2 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.70008>.

⁶⁶ Meredith L Weiss, *Malaysia's Changed Electoral Landscape* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2023), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep48635>.

⁶⁷ Tayeb and Weiss, "Islamist Government in Malaysia under PAS: Ideology, Policies, and Competition."

⁶⁸ Firzan Haniff Abd Manap and Danial Yusof, "Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) Versus Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah): A Contestation Over Interpretation of Islam in Malaysian Politics," *Historical: Journal of History and Social Sciences* 3 (2024), 120–37, <https://doi.org/10.58355/historical.v3i2.114>.

that Islam and development are incompatible, whereas Islam should be a catalyst for national progress.⁶⁹

Islamism in Indonesia Defined and Contrasted

The Islamism or Political Islam movement spans a long period of time, from era to era and is inseparable from the history of the two countries, Indonesia and Malaysia. The Islamism or Political Islam movement aims to strengthen the principles (values) or position of Islam in government. Various Islamism or political Islam movements in Indonesia are marked by events from various historical trajectories from the desire to make the Jakarta Charter the basis of the state before independence in 1945 to 212 movement in 2016.⁷⁰ Whether in the form of discourse, narrative, or street demonstrations, they certainly illustrate the extraordinary influence of the Islamist or political Islam movement in the political and religious landscape. This group's movement is taken into account by the state, as it has the potential to divide society into two camps: pro- and anti-government.

The emergence of Islamist or political Islam movements from era to era is a clear indication that Islamist or political Islam movements are becoming important competitors to moderate Islam in seizing political and religious influence nowadays.⁷¹ The Islamist or political Islam movement emerged as a form of disappointment with the secular state, which benefits the West and always harms Islam. In this context, Islamist or political Islam can be interpreted as an expression of politics and civil society, antithetical to the voice and interests of the state in Indonesia.

In contrast to Indonesia, Islamist or political Islam has experienced a different development in Malaysia in which the Islamist or political Islam movement has more easily become mainstream in socio-political, religious, and religious discourse and practices. This is due to the institutionalization of the state, manifested through the constitution and public policies that favor Islam. Since the country's founding, the constitution has stated that Islam is the source of knowledge and practice in various aspects of life, including governance. Furthermore, the 1957 constitution granted privileges to Malay groups, such as

⁶⁹ Interview with Dollah, November 15, 2024

⁷⁰ Syafiq Hasyim, "From political Islam to Islamic lifestyles: the changing public face of Islam in Indonesia," *Perspective* (2023).

⁷¹ Arifianto, "Moderate Islamic Organisations.

property ownership and special treatment in education, and they were required to practice a religion. The increasing benefits accrued to Malays naturally benefited the growing number of Muslims in Malaysia. During Mahathir Mohamad's administration in the 1980s, the government increasingly implemented policies favorable to Islam, such as the National Economic Policy. This policy not only increased Islam's political bargaining power but also provided economic benefits.

Political Islamic movements in Malaysia have always been practiced by two major forces: Barisan Nasional (UMNO) and PAS,⁷² even in the period of political coalition and the emergence of rivaling political parties simply because those coalitions and new parties are splinters or offshoot of either UMNO or PAS.⁷³ Both desire Islam to be an essential part of civilization and use it as a political tool to win the hearts of the people and gain power, albeit with different emphasis and strategies. In this regard, it can be said that the Islamization of government or the institutionalization of Islamic politics in Malaysia is more deeply embedded than in Indonesia.

Conclusion

Islamic identity politics in Indonesia and Malaysia develop through different paths, influenced by each country's historical configurations, political structures, and civil society dynamics. In Indonesia, although Islamist aspirations are increasingly visible in the public sphere, their influence is relatively tempered by moderate religious actors, civil society, and pesantren traditions that embrace pluralism. However, the infiltration of Islamist ideology into state institutions indicates a discursive shift toward religious exclusivism. Conversely, Malaysia demonstrates stronger formalization of Islam within its political system, driven by state support and the close relationship between Malay identity and Islam. The politicization of Islam by UMNO and PAS not only reinforces ethno-religious solidarity, but also deepens

⁷² Muhammad Noor Azmi, Mohammad Yaakub, and Marzudi Yunus, "The Dynamics of Malay-Muslim Politics of Umno-Pas from 2008 to 2018: A Review of Studies," *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication* 10 (2025), 19–40, <https://doi.org/10.35631/IJLGC.1040002>.

⁷³ Mohd Mohd Zain and Mohd Din, "Democratic Dilemma of Malay Islamic Party: PAS, Coalition Pattern, and Rising Social Issues," *Studia Islamika* 29 (2022), 83–109, <https://doi.org/10.36712/sdi.v29i1.16330>.

social segregation and raises concerns about the erosion of civil liberties and democratic pluralism.

Islamism in both countries cannot be understood solely as a religious movement, but rather as a complex response to structural marginalization, economic inequality, and the influence of transnational ideologies. study challenges assumptions about the moderation of Islamism in Southeast Asia. Rather than declining, these movements have adapted through new channels such as digital media, legal issues, and urban mobilization. Thus, democracy-building strategies in Indonesia and Malaysia need to go beyond mere security or accommodation approaches. Policies that emphasize inclusive governance, economic equality, pluralistic education, and strengthening moderate religious voices are necessary to create resilient and inclusive democracies. []

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