

Religious Identity and Geopolitical Transformations in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Approach

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Abstract. This study explores the impact of geopolitical shifts on religious identity in Southeast Asia, focusing on Indonesia and Singapore as case studies. Both countries, despite sharing similar global pressures, have adopted distinct approaches to managing religious identity amidst geopolitical changes. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, faces challenges in reconciling its secular, pluralistic ideals with the growing influence of political Islam. The rise of Islamic conservatism, driven by global geopolitical shifts such as the War on Terror, has led to increased political Islam and regional Sharia laws, complicating the country's pluralistic framework. In contrast, Singapore has maintained a more state-regulated approach, focusing on religious moderation and national unity through strict policies that regulate religious expression. While both countries face external pressures from the rise of Islamic conservatism, Singapore's centralized control has prevented the politicization of religion, ensuring social harmony. This comparative analysis highlights the importance of context-sensitive policies in managing religious diversity, emphasizing the need for balancing religious freedom with national unity in an increasingly interconnected world. The study provides insights into the different ways geopolitical shifts influence religious practices and governance in multicultural societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia, a region characterized by its rich cultural diversity, faces significant challenges in managing its multicultural and multi-religious societies (Manna, 2023). Comprising over 600 million people and a wide array of ethnic groups and faith traditions, Southeast Asia is one of the most complex regions in terms of religious identity and governance. Within this dynamic context, geopolitical transformations have increasingly influenced how religious identities are shaped and practiced across the region. Global geopolitical shifts, such as the rise of political Islam, transnational ideologies, and regional conflicts, have introduced new pressures that necessitate the adaptation of domestic religious policies (Pratama *et al.*, 2023). Understanding the intersection between these geopolitical changes and religious identity is crucial for fostering social cohesion, preserving pluralistic values, and managing interfaith relations in these societies.

Indonesia and Singapore serve as representative case studies for examining the broader impact of geopolitical changes on religious identity in Southeast Asia. Indonesia, with a population of over 270 million and the largest Muslim-majority population in the world, has long been recognized for its religious diversity and its commitment to pluralism through the state ideology of *Pancasila* (The Five Principles of the Indonesian State) (Idris, 2020). However, in recent decades, global geopolitical shifts, including the rise of political Islam, have posed challenges to Indonesia's secular foundations (Idris Nassery, 2018). The War on Terror, Middle Eastern conflicts, and the influx of conservative Islamic ideologies have contributed to a growing influence of political Islam, leading to debates on the role of religion in public life and governance (Ulum, 2020). Indonesia's struggle to balance religious freedom with national unity in the face of rising ideological polarization exemplifies the complexities faced by many Southeast Asian nations in managing religious identity amidst global tensions.

On the other hand, Singapore, a smaller city-state with a diverse population, offers a contrasting model of governance. With a population of 5.7 million, including a significant Muslim minority, Singapore has implemented a state-regulated approach to maintaining religious harmony (Mathew, 2017). The government has actively sought to control religious expression, ensuring that it aligns with the national values of social cohesion and tolerance. While Singapore faces similar external pressures from the rise of Islamic conservatism, it has maintained a pragmatic approach by enforcing policies that regulate religious practices and promote moderation. These policies are aimed at preventing the politicization of religion and ensuring that religious expression does not disrupt the delicate multicultural balance that has defined the country's national identity (Karimullah, 2023).

The growing influence of transnational religious ideologies, particularly those rooted in conservative interpretations of Islam, poses a significant challenge for both Indonesia and Singapore. In Indonesia, the increasing prominence of Islamic conservatism has raised concerns about the erosion of pluralistic ideals, as religious groups push for greater alignment between religion and state (Burhanuddin and Khairuddin, 2022). In contrast, Singapore's government has sought to counteract this trend by regulating religious expression and promoting a form of Islam that is consistent with the values of multiculturalism and national unity (Muchtar and Amin, 2024). The responses of these two countries to the influence of geopolitical shifts on religious identity provide valuable insights into how nations can adapt to the pressures of global ideologies while maintaining social harmony and stability.

This study aims to explore the impact of geopolitical transformations on religious identity in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on Indonesia and Singapore. By examining how these countries have responded to the challenges posed by global shifts in geopolitics, this research seeks to highlight the ways in which domestic religious policies can be shaped by external geopolitical forces. Furthermore, it will offer a comparative analysis of how different political systems, Indonesia's pluralistic framework and Singapore's state-regulated model, respond to the rise of religious conservatism in a rapidly changing global context. Ultimately,

this study will contribute to the broader discourse on religion, geopolitics, and multiculturalism in Southeast Asia, offering insights that are relevant to other nations facing similar challenges in managing religious diversity amidst global political changes.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach to explore the impact of geopolitical transformations on religious identity in Southeast Asia, specifically focusing on Indonesia and Singapore. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the complex interplay between global geopolitical shifts and the local religious landscapes of these two countries (Farr, 2008). By comparing Indonesia's and Singapore's responses to similar external pressures, this research seeks to identify the distinctive ways in which each country navigates the challenges of maintaining religious harmony while responding to geopolitical changes.

Data for this study were collected through multiple methods, including semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and a comprehensive literature review (Denny and Weckesser, 2022). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, such as religious leaders, policymakers, and scholars, to gain insights into the ways in which geopolitical factors have influenced religious practices and policies in both countries. These interviews provided valuable perspectives on the local perceptions of global religious movements, such as the rise of political Islam, and the national strategies for managing religious identity within a multicultural framework.

In addition to interviews, the study utilized document analysis to examine government policies, religious regulations, and official statements that reflect each country's approach to religious governance in the context of global geopolitical shifts (Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger, 2020). This included an analysis of policy documents, government reports on religious harmony, and statements from religious councils in Indonesia and Singapore.

The literature review was conducted to contextualize the findings within the broader academic discourse on religion, geopolitics, and multiculturalism in Southeast Asia. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns and trends in the data, allowing for a comparative examination of the strategies employed by Indonesia and Singapore in managing religious identity amidst global geopolitical pressures.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, exploring how geopolitical shifts, particularly the rise of political Islam and the influence of global Islamic ideologies, have shaped religious identity and governance in Southeast Asia (Zulkifli *et al.*, 2023). Through a comparative analysis of Indonesia and Singapore, the study highlights the different approaches these countries have adopted in response to similar global pressures. Indonesia, with its large Muslim-majority population, has faced growing challenges in balancing its secular, pluralistic ideals with the increasing influence of political Islam, driven by geopolitical events such as the War on Terror and conflicts in the Middle East.

In contrast, Singapore has maintained a more regulated approach to religious governance, with policies designed to ensure religious harmony and prevent the politicization of religion. Despite facing similar external pressures from rising Islamic conservatism, Singapore's state-driven model emphasizes moderation and social cohesion, regulating religious expression to maintain national unity (Ang and Stratton, 2018). The following sections will explore these findings in detail, focusing on how each country has addressed the challenges posed by geopolitical shifts to religious identity.

3.1. Geopolitical Shifts and Political Islam in Indonesia

The findings of this study highlight that Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority country, faces significant challenges in balancing religious pluralism with the growing influence of political Islam (Maksum *et al.*, 2022). Following the democratization of Indonesia in 1998, there was an expansion of space for political Islam, providing platforms for Islamic political parties and conservative movements to exert influence over public life (Anna Kurniawati, Arief Subhan and Morissan, 2024). This trend was largely driven by global geopolitical shifts, such as the War on Terror and the growing presence of conservative Islamic ideologies from the Middle East. These global shifts contributed to a more prominent role for political Islam, raising debates about the role of religion in governance and public life (Rahman, 2022).

Moreover, the study finds that the influence of Middle Eastern Islamic movements, including Salafi and Wahhabi ideologies, has grown in Indonesia, facilitated by religious networks, media, and educational institutions (Naim and Muhajir, 2020). These movements promote a return to what is considered the "pure" practice of Islam and have been instrumental in shaping religious practices across Indonesia (Suryadinata, 2015). The increasing visibility of these movements signals a tension between Indonesia's pluralistic values and the rise of more conservative religious practices. The challenge for Indonesia lies in reconciling its secular, pluralistic framework with the growing influence of conservative Islam, particularly as regional laws such as Sharia law in Aceh increasingly conflict with national secular policies (Zamroni, Astuti and Zuhri, 2021).

In addition to the growing influence of political Islam, the study found that geopolitical shifts, particularly following the War on Terror, have intensified public discourse on the role of Islam in governance. This has led to increasing political mobilization by conservative religious groups who call for the integration of Islamic principles in Indonesia's legal and political framework. The influence of Middle Eastern ideologies, particularly through transnational networks, is evident in the rise of conservative Islamic movements such as Salafism and Wahhabism, contributing to the ideological shift within Indonesian society (Ahmad *et al.*, 2021). Despite these changes, the government continues to promote pluralism, yet faces the challenge of maintaining social cohesion amidst rising religious conservatism.

3.2. Indonesia's Struggle with Secularism and Political Islam

The findings also reveal that Indonesia's commitment to secularism and pluralism is increasingly under pressure from the rise of political Islam. While the country has maintained its secular constitution and pluralistic identity, the growing influence of conservative Islamic ideologies poses a direct challenge to these principles (Fernando *et al.*, 2024). The Indonesian state has made efforts to balance religious freedom with the need for unity in a diverse society, but the rise of conservative Islam in the public sphere complicates this balance (Rahman, 2022).

The War on Terror and subsequent geopolitical conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, have further shaped Indonesia's

religious landscape, with the global rise of radical Islamic ideologies contributing to a heightened scrutiny of Islamic practices (Wani, 2023). The study confirms the increasing polarization within Indonesian society, where religious expression is being more closely scrutinized, particularly in urban areas where conservative ideologies are more visible (Maksum *et al.*, 2022). This finding is consistent with the literature, which suggests that Indonesia is at a crossroads in terms of its identity as a secular state amidst growing religious conservatism.

The study also identifies the difficulty faced by Indonesia in navigating the balance between its secular constitution and the rise of political Islam. While efforts to maintain religious pluralism remain strong, regional applications of Sharia law and the increased role of Islamic political parties complicate this balance. These movements have fostered a growing sense of religious identity that sometimes conflicts with Indonesia's national motto of "Unity in Diversity." (Sidi, 2019) The government's challenge lies in reinforcing its commitment to secularism while accommodating the political demands of conservative religious groups. This tension is further amplified by global ideological flows, influencing domestic policy.

3.3. Religious Moderation in Singapore: A State-Regulated Approach

In contrast, Singapore's approach to managing religious identity is more state-regulated. The study finds that Singapore has adopted a strong state-led approach to religious moderation, with policies designed to ensure religious practices align with the national goals of social cohesion and harmony (Ma'arif, Sebastian and Sholihan, 2020). The government's regulation of religious expression, including controlling religious sermons and public displays of religion, is aimed at maintaining religious peace and preventing any one religion from gaining undue political influence (Riyanto, Herningtyas and Nizar, 2021). This model is in stark contrast to Indonesia's more decentralized approach, where religious diversity is more freely expressed in public forums.

The findings also show that while Singapore faces similar global pressures from the rise of Islamic conservatism, it has been able to maintain stability through its regulatory approach. The government's implementation of policies such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act ensures that religious expression remains within bounds that align with Singapore's vision of a harmonious, multicultural society (Mahzam, Faizal and Abdul, 2019). This contrasts with Indonesia, where religious practices are more subject to local interpretations and laws, potentially challenging national unity.

In Singapore, the state's regulation of religious identity aims to prevent any religious group from gaining political influence, particularly in the context of rising Islamic conservatism. The study found that Singapore's policies have effectively preserved social harmony by moderating religious expression, ensuring that all faiths coexist without creating tension (Riyanto, Herningtyas and Nizar, 2021). However, this regulation also poses challenges, particularly for the Muslim community, as some groups within the youth population are increasingly influenced by global conservative Islamic ideologies. These younger Muslims are seeking more stringent religious practices, presenting a potential point of friction between individual religious expression and the government's policies.

3.4. Managing Geopolitical Pressures: A Comparative Approach

A comparative analysis of Indonesia and Singapore reveals two distinct approaches to managing religious identity amid geopolitical shifts. In Indonesia, the rising influence of political Islam has forced the state to confront the complexities of balancing Islamic conservatism with its pluralistic, secular foundations (Qoumas, Affandi and Abdul, 2024). While Indonesia has made strides in promoting religious tolerance, the growing political strength of Islamic parties and movements challenges the state's commitment to secularism (Alvian and Ardhani, 2023). The study finds that Indonesia's approach is increasingly challenged by the internal pressures of Islamic movements, which are further exacerbated by global geopolitical shifts (Achmad, Harahap and Ihsan, 2023).

In contrast, Singapore's model of religious governance focuses on regulation and control, with the government actively managing religious expression to ensure it aligns with the state's vision of multiculturalism. The government's emphasis on religious moderation has been crucial in preventing the rise of religious extremism and maintaining national unity. While this approach has successfully prevented religious conflicts, the study also finds that it restricts some forms of religious expression, particularly for Muslim communities seeking to express more conservative forms of Islam (Kunkunrat, 2021). This regulatory model demonstrates the complexity of balancing religious freedom with national stability in a multicultural context.

The comparative analysis of Indonesia and Singapore reveals how different political frameworks respond to similar geopolitical pressures. In Indonesia, the rise of political Islam has intensified debates about the role of religion in public life, often leading to greater polarization (Maksum *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, Singapore's highly regulated approach seeks to avoid such polarization by keeping religion separate from politics (Pratama *et al.*, 2023). While both countries strive to maintain social cohesion, Indonesia's pluralism is increasingly challenged by the growing influence of conservative Islam, while Singapore's regulatory framework is increasingly tested by the rise of Islamic conservatism among its younger Muslim population.

3.5. Global Influence on Religious Identity in Southeast Asia

The findings also confirm the significant role that global geopolitical shifts play in shaping religious identity in Southeast Asia. The study shows that both Indonesia and Singapore are influenced by transnational Islamic movements, which are increasingly powerful in shaping religious practices in Southeast Asia (Jati, 2022). In Indonesia, the rise of global Islamic ideologies has contributed to the visibility of more conservative Islamic movements, while in Singapore, the government's regulation of religion has sought to prevent the politicization of religion and maintain social order (Saat, Ibrahim and Rahman, 2020).

The influence of global Islamic conservatism has been particularly noticeable among younger Muslims in both countries. In Indonesia, this has led to a more pronounced reassertion of Islamic identity in the public sphere, contributing to debates about the role of Islam in governance. In Singapore, the rise of Islamic conservatism has prompted the government to adjust its policies to manage religious expression, emphasizing moderation and interfaith dialogue to prevent religious tensions (Hartoyo *et al.*, 2020). These findings are consistent with the literature, which highlights the ongoing global influence of Islamic ideologies in Southeast Asia, further complicating efforts to manage religious diversity and identity in the region (Maksum *et al.*, 2022).

In light of these findings, the study shows that both Indonesia and Singapore are deeply impacted by the spread of conservative Islamic ideologies, albeit in different ways. The Indonesian government is grappling with the increasing visibility of

Islamic conservatism, which challenges the country's pluralistic ideals (Fernando *et al.*, 2024). Meanwhile, Singapore's state-driven approach, although successful in maintaining harmony, faces challenges in balancing global influences with local policies (Mahzam, Faizal and Abdul, 2019). The global spread of Islamic movements will likely continue to influence both countries' religious landscapes, making it essential for governments to adapt policies that foster inclusivity while maintaining national stability.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the impact of geopolitical shifts on religious identity in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on Indonesia and Singapore. The findings highlight how global changes, such as the rise of political Islam and transnational Islamic ideologies, have influenced religious practices and policies in both countries. Indonesia, with its commitment to secularism and pluralism, faces significant challenges in balancing the growing influence of conservative Islamic movements with its national values. The increasing role of political Islam has complicated Indonesia's ability to maintain religious harmony, as regional Sharia laws and the rise of Islamic parties put pressure on the country's secular foundation.

In contrast, Singapore's state-regulated approach has allowed it to maintain social harmony and prevent religious extremism, though at the cost of regulating religious expression. The government's emphasis on religious moderation and national unity has proven effective in managing religious diversity, but it has also faced challenges in accommodating more conservative religious practices, particularly among its Muslim minority. This comparative analysis underscores the importance of context-sensitive policies in managing religious identity in the face of geopolitical pressures. Both Indonesia and Singapore provide valuable lessons for other multicultural societies, demonstrating that balancing religious freedom with national unity is essential for maintaining social cohesion in a rapidly changing global landscape.

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