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RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Dr. Zubaidi Wahyono Dr. Alizaman D. Gamon** Dr. Maulana Akbar Shah****

Abstract: In the contemporary global landscape, religious tolerance has emerged as a critical issue across both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim countries. Shared concerns, such as freedom of religion, conversion, freedom of worship and propagation, and violence stemming from religious misunderstandings—including extremism and terrorism—have garnered significant global attention. Addressing these issues is vital for fostering peaceful coexistence and understanding among diverse religious communities. The objective of the study is to understand the concept of tolerance and how it is applied in Southeast Asian countries, particularly in the national policies of Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines. These policies provide public space for religious tolerance, thereby opening the door for the protection of freedom of religion and addressing other religious issues currently taking place in the region. Given the socio-political and religious dynamics in the region, this study aims to investigate the underlying causes of conflicts, insurgencies, terrorism, and religious tensions. By identifying these root causes, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper

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understanding of the complex factors driving instability and violence in the area. This study offers a thorough analysis of various perspectives on religious tolerance within the ASEAN region, framed through the lens of multiculturalism. By integrating contemporary literature with detailed field observations, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how religious tolerance is reflected and practiced in the constitutions, national laws, and policies of the member countries. The study reveals that instances of intolerance, extremism, conflict, and violence observed across the region are predominantly influenced by economic, social, and political factors, rather than being primarily motivated by religious concerns. In summary, the study argues that attributing conflict, violence, and extremism to the teachings of a religion—which typically promotes love, peace, and mutual respect—misconstrues the root causes. The findings suggest that economic and social inequalities, ethnicism, and political policies are more significant factors contributing to the national instability experienced across the region.

Keywords: Religious Freedom, Religious Tolerance, Religious Extremism, Government Policies, Southeast Asia.

Introduction

Located at the crossroads of Asia, Southeast Asia consists of countries with ethnics, cultures, and religions. It is probably the unique community with the most diverse cultures and religions living together harmoniously. Almost all religions can be found in these countries be it a minority or the majority one. Historically, Southeast Asians have practiced various religions, including Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, Christianity, and others. Interestingly, these religions have been practiced by the people of Southeast Asia and living together harmoniously and there was no significant conflict between them. Statistically, Southeast Asia is a uniquely multi-religious region, with Islam being the dominant religion in three countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. Conversely, Buddhism is the predominant religion in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Singapore. Meanwhile, the countries in SEA with a Christian or Catholic majority are the Philippines and Timor Leste. By religion, Islam is the most popular religion in the region with 42% of followers living in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. Buddhism forms 18% of the population, mainly in Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Singapore. Christianity is a popular religion in both the Philippines and Timor Leste with 17%. The rest of the population includes Confucianism, Hinduism, and indigenous beliefs. The Philippines is a Catholic-majority country with almost 80% of the population and 9%

Protestant and approximately 6-11 percent Muslims. The number of Muslims in the Philippines is debatable according to PSA (Philippine Statistics Authority) which is 6 percent while according to NCMF (National Commission for Muslim Filipinos) is between 10-11 percent. This difference is due to factors such as the reluctance of some Muslims to be surveyed due to political reasons and the inaccessibility of the Muslim area due to sporadic islands in the Southern Philippines.¹ This multi-religious population of the SEA countries had created a unique environment and inter-religious relations that challenged them to prove the meaning of tolerance and freedom of faith and practice. This situation motivated the governments to ensure the peace and harmony of the people in ASEAN countries by adopting religious freedom or religious tolerance and formulating the laws to implement it. The differences in social structures in the ASEAN countries, however, contributed to the diversity of laws and acts to suit the needs of people of different faiths.

The article attempts to discover how religious tolerance is practiced and implemented in the region and how the governments of SEA are translating religious freedom and tolerance into their constitution and laws. Some cases have been chosen to represent the rest of how religious tolerance is applied and implemented in these countries and what are the issues faced by these countries. Like other societies, the region has a long experience of settling impeding historical and cultural misunderstandings and disputes. They have explored constitutional legalities for providing a public space for religious tolerance as a mechanism for the realization of multiculturalism. The type of leadership and the unconditional commitment of people towards the realization of religious tolerance leads us to the necessity to define the concept of religious tolerance. Why is there a need to define the concept and its relevance in society? What are the best societal practices that may lead to the observance of religious tolerance? How do we sustain and develop religious tolerance in this age of multiculturalism?

Defining Religious Tolerance

It is not easy to come up with a precise definition of religious tolerance due to the subjectivity of the meaning according to each religion. This fact was acknowledged by religious studies scholars such as David Little of Harvard who said that the term religious tolerance is a very complex term to define. Little identified one of the primary challenges in rethinking

¹ International Religious Freedom, “PHILIPPINES 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT,” 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PHILIPPINES-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>.

tolerance as the difficulty in defining the word itself. Little proposed two definitions of tolerance. *First*, he defined it as a response to differing beliefs, characterized by disapproval but without resorting to force or coercion to change these beliefs. He argued that suppressing the natural inclination to punish those with differing views is an act of tolerance. *Second*, Little suggested that tolerance involves not only refraining from coercion but also respecting the opposing viewpoint. He termed this “sublimated disapproval.”² Little's analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of religious tolerance, emphasizing the challenges in providing a singular, universally applicable definition. Recognizing the complex nature of defining religious tolerance, as outlined earlier, this paper will limit its discussion to the most common and basic interpretation.

The term religious tolerance has been defined and interpreted in various ways by scholars of different religions. There is no doubt that the definitions given by various scholars have been influenced to a certain degree by their belief systems and worldviews. In an attempt for a comprehensive definition, it would be more appropriate to take into consideration the most common definition that can be found in the works of scholars from different religions and traditions. Those definitions may provide the readers with the necessary intellectual windows to grasp the essence of religious tolerance within the given time and space.³ The concept of tolerance is understood as to bear, to endure, or to put up with. It also means the capacity to endure pain or hardship, it provides the practitioners the feeling of sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own. Etymologically, the concept is derived from the Latin word ‘*tolerantia*’ which means passive patience, the voluntary transfer of suffering, pain, or evil. From a Western perspective, tolerance is often understood as toleration, meaning ‘permission or concession concerning religious freedom.’⁴ Deducing its meaning from the Latin word ‘*tolerantia*,’ tolerance implies a humanistic dimension of social relationship that gives importance to the quality of endurance or moderation which is expressed through conscious suppression of feeling of rejection caused by all that is different in the other in terms of appearance, the manner of speech, tastes, lifestyle, and belief. Additionally, tolerance implies a willingness to understand through a systematic dialogue with others, by recognizing and respecting

² Eric Rangus, “Religious Tolerance Starts with a DefinitionTitle” (Dowman Drive Atlanta, 2001), https://www.emory.edu/EMORY_REPORT/erarchive/2001/April/erApril.2/4_2_01tolerance.

³ Merriam Dictionary, “Tolerance Noun,” 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tolerance>.

⁴ Igboin O. Benson, “Theory and Praxis of Religious Tolerance,” *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies* 12, no. 1 (2016): 293, <https://doi.org/10.4314/og.v12i1.16>.

legitimate human differences.⁵ Lexico and Longman dictionaries share a fundamental core principle in defining the universal meaning of tolerance. They associate it with the ability or willingness to tolerate opinions or behavior one dislikes or disagrees with, as well as the willingness to allow others to do, say, or believe what they want without criticism or punishment.⁶ Indicative of this meaning is the ability to respect or appreciate others with all the differences that exist in society.

Individuals and society may differ in the level of comprehension of the concept of religious tolerance and its implementation in various social systems. Tolerance connotes that every person or community has the same right, to acknowledge the rights of others for having different opinions, desires, and behaviors. Given the commonalities and differences in religious beliefs and worldviews, it is therefore the moral responsibility of enlightened scholars to readdress the complex nature of religious tolerance as an important discourse in this era of cultural and religious pluralism. There is an urgency to re-educate the mind and intellect on the importance of re-aligning the meaning of tolerance with the concept of inherent human freedom whereby mutual respect and norms protect the rights of the individual to exercise his/her right to adopt and practice his/her faith in a given time and space is eventually recognized at the individual and social level. It is presumably understood that every believer of a particular religion is expected to follow the belief system, rites, and rituals of his/her religion. The complexity of religious tolerance can be discerned from the varied knowledge of the practitioners as well as the institutionalization of those ideas in protecting the integrity of religious beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies as well as ways of resolving the issues of conversion. It is indeed a sad scenario in our world today to have witnessed the emergence of religious fanatics led by religious zealots from different religions whose aim is to spread exclusivist approaches that delimit the universal message of every religion. In addition, given the impact of the mainstream discourse on terrorism, it is very timely for enlightened leaders and scholars to correct the misconceptions made against religion by associating social tension, conflict, or even civil war with religion. The world community must find common ground for mutual respect and create a harmonious life in society and the world in general.

⁵ Rano Karimovna Boykuziyeva, "Theoretical and Practical Issues of Researching the Characteristics of the Formation of Social Tolerance in Students" 18 (2023): 14–19, <https://zienjournals.com/>.

⁶ Pearson Languages, "Tolerance," Pearson Languages, 2024, <https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/tolerance>.

There are two main models of tolerance: *firstly*, passive tolerance which means accepting differences as factual. *Secondly*, active tolerance means being involved with others amid differences and variations. The outcome of tolerance is living peacefully side by side while accepting existing differences.⁷ An example of passive tolerance is to refrain from supporting discriminatory laws or policies, to recognize the differences among people to be open-minded by exploring the role of good faith in understanding the objective value of a significant number of cultures and belief systems besides their own. Active tolerance is manifested in taking part in private and public spheres to make religious minorities feel accepted based upon an acknowledgement of the subjective value that minorities attribute to their beliefs.⁸ Religious tolerance requires the establishment of a social environment that guarantees safety so that believers of a particular religion can feel comfortable in expressing their religious identity without being discriminated against. Such a condition could be possible if the dominant group utilizes legal and political institutions to protect the rights of minority groups.⁹ Harvard Professor David Little has rightly pointed out that tolerance is a response to beliefs initially deemed objectionable, expressing disapproval without resorting to force or coercion to change them.¹⁰ He added that tolerance does not use coercion or force against an opponent, but a tolerant person respects the other's viewpoints or in other words, it is "sublimated disapproval."¹¹ On the other hand, intolerance is defined as an unwillingness to allow others to act differently or hold opinions that differ from your own. The other meaning is someone's refusal to accept behaviour, beliefs, or opinions that are different from their own.¹² The act of intolerance can be expressed in various ways such as oppression, discrimination, violence, extremism, as well as terrorism, or any act that denies the rights and freedom of others. Thus, an act of intolerance could be due to religious reasons that appear in various forms such as intimidation, harassment, and internment to terrorism and outright warfare. Usually, it arises when the core beliefs that define a group's identity are fundamentally challenged.¹³

⁷ Lester, Emile, and Roberts, Patrick S. "The Distinctive Paradox of Religious Tolerance: Active Tolerance as a Mean between Passive Tolerance and Recognition.," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2006): 329–62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40441448>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Barry Bussey, James Standish, and Carol Rasmussen, "Religion, Human Rights, and Religious Freedom A Symposium Issue," in *FIDES ET LIBERTAS*, ed. Barry W. Bussey, Casalaba, and Trent Hills (Maryland: International Religious Liberty Association, 2010), 196, <https://www.irla.org/fides-2010.pdf>.

¹¹ Eric Rangus, "Religious Tolerance Starts with a Definition Title."

¹² HarperCollins Publishers, "Definition of 'Intolerance,'" HarperCollins Publishers, 2024, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/intolerance>.

¹³ Robert Muggah and Ali Velshi, "Religious Violence Is on the Rise. What Can Faith-Based Communities Do about It?," 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/events/sustainable-development-impact-meetings-2024/>.

Apart from the common understanding of tolerance discussed earlier, however, the concept of tolerance has different perceptions and limits depending on a particular religion. This difference is due to the basic principles of faith and the norms of that religion that differ from one to another. It is necessary, however, to limit the discussion on the meaning of religious tolerance to the protection of the basic rights of human beings to own the freedom of faith and to practice his or her religion without attempting to abuse, disrespect, degrade, or limit one's faith or religion. It is in line with the United Nations charter as a standard definition of religious tolerance despite its shortage and simplicity. It is mentioned in article 18 as follows: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance". This simple article of the UN Charter could be elaborated in different ways by different religions that may agree or disagree with the article. In addition, many issues arise in every country that cannot be solved simply by referring to the article. However, due to the broadness of the issue and the limitation of the topic the above connotation could be used as a common reference of religious tolerance.

It is worth mentioning here the opinion of Jay Newman that the obstacles to religious tolerance are often associated with adherence to superstitious beliefs, unresolved disagreements and conflicts, indolence, ethnocentrism, and legitimate differences in religious creeds.¹⁴ He further elaborated that the most basic reason for the problem of religious tolerance is the misunderstanding of the concept of religious tolerance due to the impact of secular thoughts on the contemporary knowledge system, many societies have often overlooked the most basic obstacle to religious tolerance, which is the problem of erroneous knowledge of religious tolerance. Aware of the multifaceted dimensions of tolerance within the context of social, economic, and political and the complexities of the issue, the present study is aimed at exploring the concept of religious tolerance as understood and practiced in ASEAN countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines. The study also focused on the way a country protects freedom of faith in its philosophy as well as its legislation and how this concept is translated into practice. Learning from the mistakes of other nations, the whole globe, particularly the Asian region has regarded tolerance as a practical formula that could be adopted by individuals and society as a means for the development of co-existence in a civilized way between two sides that are different in term of faith, belief, and view.¹⁵

¹⁴Jay Newman, "The Idea of Religious Tolerance," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 15 (1978): 187–95, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009713>.

¹⁵Emmanuel Agius and Jolanta Ambrosewicz, "Towards a Culture of Tolerance and Peace," in *Towards a Culture of Tolerance and Peace* (Montreal (Quebec): International Bureau for Children's Rights, 2003), 1–65, www.ibcr.org.

Religious Freedom in ASEAN and its Legal Protection

ASEAN community generally with a multi-religious population is committed to protecting the freedom of religion along with the human rights statutes and the United Nations constitution. This commitment is translated into the legal constitution of each country in different ways. Therefore, in this section, the focus of the discussion will be on religious freedom in the ASEAN community emphasizing its legal protection, which is as follows:

Indonesia and Malaysia

For the Indonesian case as an example, religious freedom is manifested in Indonesian laws named UUD 45 article 29 which states: “Every citizen of Indonesia is free to adopt a religion and to practice it accordingly, to choose an education or learning system, to choose a career, to choose citizenship, to choose a place in the country to settle and to leave it and he deserves to return”. The freedom of religion is also asserted in sect, 29 (no 2), of the State Constitution, which states that the state guarantees the citizen to adopt the religion as he wills. The freedom of religion in Indonesia however is limited by certain conditions which is elaborated further in the enactment of the three ministers namely the Minister of Religious Affairs, Supreme Court, and Minister of Internal Affairs no. 03 year 2008, No. KEP-033/A/JA/6/2008 and no. 199 the year 2008 on the Reminder and the Order to the followers of the Ahmadiyyah sect. In the case of Indonesia which is based on the state philosophy of Pancasila and the state constitution of UUD 45, there are 5 religions acknowledged by the state namely, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. However other sub-religions or sects are acknowledged too including local indigenous sects or Animism. The right of this religion is stated in the state constitution article 28E (part.1).¹⁶

The Ahmadiyyah (Baha’i) sect, however, is a very unique case due to its complexity that implicates the Islamic tenets. It is due to its attachment to Islam and its teachings are mostly derived from Islam, but it differed from Islamic teachings in some issues such as the belief in the next prophet after Muhammad PBUH. So, the issue here is not solely about the

¹⁶PASAL 28 E (1) UUD45 no 28 “Everyone has the right to embrace their religion and worship according to their beliefs, choose their education and teachings, select their profession, choose their citizenship, choose a place to live within the country, and leave it, as well as the right to return. Rights: Everyone has the right to freely choose their religion and worship according to their beliefs, and to choose different education and teachings. Obligations: We must choose a religion and worship according to our own beliefs, and we must choose our citizenship and place of residence.” (2). “Everyone has the right to freedom of belief, to express thoughts and attitudes in accordance with their conscience. **Rights:** Everyone has the right to the freedom of belief, to express thoughts and attitudes according to their conscience. **Obligations:** Everyone must hold their beliefs and express thoughts and attitudes that align with their conscience.”

freedom of belief but it is due to its confusion with the Islamic belief that could fall under the blasphemy act. According to the elaboration of the UUD 45 which is known as KUHP section 156a, it is stated that whoever by intention in public expresses by word or action which can be interpreted as causing enmity, misuse, or making blasphemy towards any religion recognized in Indonesia he/she could be sentenced to a maximum of 5 years imprisonment. However, this act has recently sparked controversies among human rights groups due to its contradiction with freedom of speech and opinion.¹⁷ This controversy was sparked by the decision of the Jakarta court that sentenced former Jakarta Governor Basuki Cahaya Purnama (Ahok) for 2 years for his controversial statement during the Election campaign in 2016.¹⁸ The act of blasphemy was introduced after the failed Communist revolution in 1965 which led to the birth of the Blasphemy Act No. 1 year 1965. Apart from that the act was also inspired by the first article of state philosophy Pancasila which says the faith in one God. Along with the democratization process in Indonesia especially after the 90th reformation movement, the demand for more freedom for the religious minorities had arisen. The blasphemy act had been criticized by these groups to be an obstacle to achieving the true freedom of religion. It is because the act is seen to be misused by the government to detain or ban any individual or activity for religious defamation.

Indonesia has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (No. 12/2005), which protects individual rights to freedom of opinion, belief, and religion, including the right to adopt any faith.¹⁹ In the Indonesian context, the freedom of religion is guided by the state philosophy Pancasila whereby the first article is belief in God. Hence it is considered illegal for someone who adopted no religion or atheism based on the state constitution. However, along with the democratization process after the 90th Reformation era, the demand of giving freedom of religion even to adopt atheism has intensified.

The demand for more freedom also arises from various religious minorities and the recognition of some religious sects such as Shi'ism, Ahmadiyyah, or Qadiyani and even some new religious sects introduced by individuals or communities. This is due to several incidents that took place recently involving the followers of these sects whereby their followers were attacked and ransacked by the Sunni Muslims for having certain rituals or

¹⁷Fana F Suparman, "Pasal Penodaan Agama Bertentangan Dengan Demokrasi," April 2017, <https://www.beritasatu.com/news/430435/pasal-penodaan-agama-bertentangan-dengan-demokrasi>.

¹⁸Ben Westcott, "Jakarta Governor Ahok Found Guilty in Landmark Indonesian Blasphemy Trial," May 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/09/asia/ahok-trial-verdict/index.html>.

¹⁹M. Zainuddin, "Kebebasan Beragama Dan Demokratisasi Di Indonesia," *EL-HARAKAH (TERAKREDITASI)* 11, no. 50 (2009): 172–80, <https://doi.org/10.18860/el.v0i0.431>.

festivals. An example is the Shi'ite community in Sampang, Madura Island where they were attacked, and their houses were burned down by the surrounding Sunni Muslims forcing them to migrate to other towns for their safety.

Another issue is about the status of Ahmadiyyah followers in East Lombok on May 19, 2018. Twenty-four followers of Ahmadiyyah were attacked, and their homes were ransacked, forcing them to seek refuge at the police station in Lotim district. This incident was not the first one after similar incidents took place in other areas such as in West Nusa Tenggara earlier. Such incidents have been condemned by human rights groups, who blamed the decree declaring Ahmadiyyah a deviant sect and asserting that it deserved to be eliminated.²⁰

There is some criticism of the freedom of religion in Indonesia and Malaysia by Western scholars due to the 'oppression' of the minority as stated above. However, it should be noted that the freedom of religion should be understood according to the local context and the society. The case could not be viewed only from the Western viewpoint whereby freedom of religion means absolute freedom without any limit or restrictions.

Ahmadiyyah sect is perhaps a unique case in which its status is controversial either considered as Muslim or non-Muslim due to its resemblance with Islamic teachings. Its status is neither recognized as an Islamic sect/madhab nor as an independent religion. Many Muslim scholars have excluded Ahmadiyyah from the Islamic faith due to its contradiction with the fundamental tenets of Islam.

According to Makruf Amin, the former Chief of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and current Vice President, the main issue surrounding the controversy about Ahmadiyyah lies in its doctrine of a new prophethood after Muhammad (PBUH) by its founder, Ghulam Ahmad. This doctrine cannot be tolerated in Islam, as it challenges the fundamental beliefs of the faith.²¹ The issue could be different if Ahmadiyyah claimed to be a new religion whereby it completely brought a new faith and teachings and did not resemble the Islamic teachings. This is probably the main reason why Ahmadiyyah status is disputable in almost all Muslim countries, and it could fall under the act of blasphemy or religious defamation under the Indonesian laws. The Islamic Scholars Council of Indonesia (MUI) issued a fatwa (religious verdict) declaring Ahmadiyyah to be a deviant sect and outside of

²⁰ Kristian Erdianto, "Di Sidang MK, Peneliti LIPI Nilai Ahmadiyah Tak Bisa Dianggap Sesat," *Kompas.Com*, November 2017, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2017/11/07/18102221/di-sidang-mk-peneliti-lipi-nilai-ahmadiyah-tak-bisa-dianggap-sesat?page=all>.

²¹ Rohmatin Bonasir, "Kenapa Ahmadiyah Dianggap Bukan Islam: Fakta Dan Kontroversinya," *BBC*, February 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-42642858>.

Islam.²² The fatwa, however, had been blamed by human rights groups for the incitement of violence against Ahmadiyyah followers.

Malaysia on the other hand had declared Ahmadiyyah as a deviant sect, hence its practice and propagation are considered illegal. The National Fatwa Council issued a fatwa on 18 June 1975 that Ahmadiyyah is illegal. This move was later followed by the Selangor Fatwa Council on 25 November 1975 and subsequently by the Sabah Fatwa Council²³. This opinion was also shared by the decision of royal meeting number 101 that Ahmadiyyah is a deviant sect and consequently its propagation is illegal. The fatwa is also reconfirmed by JAKIM (Islamic Development Office) that Ahmadiyyah is considered a deviant sect of Islam. On the other hand, Islamic organizations such as Rabithah Alam Islami (The Muslim World League) and the Fatwa Council of Islamic Countries have issued a fatwa declaring Ahmadiyyah outside of Islam.²⁴

As for Shi'ism, there are different opinions on that and generally, it is moderate despite the controversies that exist between that ideology and Sunni's. Indonesia and Malaysia as Sunni Muslim countries recognized this sect to be practiced by the Shi'ite followers as there is no act or rules banning the adoption of this sect. However, in Malaysia, the propagation of this ideology among Sunni followers is somewhat restricted to avoid social conflict within society. That is due to controversies on the fundamental issues between the two theologies. In Indonesia, several incidents took place in several places where Shi'ite communities were attacked by Sunni followers such as the incident that took place in Sampang Madura in 2019 whereby the newly developed Shi'ite compound was attacked by the Sunni followers.²⁵

The Indonesian approach towards Shi'ism can be considered more lenient that is by giving more space to the Shi'ite communities. However, this policy was blamed for causing social conflicts that took place so far while Malaysia which used preventive measures to restrict the propagation of Shi'ism managed to minimize the conflicts in the society.

From the above discussion, it could be concluded that freedom of religion is quite a complex issue, and it could not be simply generalized. The issue could be different from the

²² Handoko Ja'far, "Reducing Discordant Religious Relationships: Ahmadiyya Case in Indonesia," *UMRAN - International Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies* 11, no. 1 (2024): 49–61, <https://doi.org/10.11113/umran2024.11n1.665>.

²³ Azharudin Mohamed Dali, "Gerakan Ahmadiyah (Qadiani) Di Malaysia: Satu Sorotan Sejarah," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 5 (2010): 33–55, <https://ejournal.um.edu.my/index.php/JAT/article/view/8536/6104>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Kodrat setiawan, "Bagaimana Kronologi Syiah Masuk Sampang?," *TEMPO*, September 2012, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/426989/bagaimana-kronologi-syiah-masuk-sampang>.

Western perspective due to different perceptions of religious issues, the complexity of the social structure as well as the cultural background and political interest in the respective country. Another issue is about the status of the indigenous sects (*Aliran Kepercayaan*) that exist in different parts of Indonesia and practice the local spiritual teachings. Based on the state constitution there are six major religions recognized by the Government of which these traditional sects are not among them. This situation has caused some problems for these communities registering their religion on the identity card as well as the marriage procedure and registration. However, for the case of the registration card it had been settled after a long debate and process whether these sects could be recognized as a religion or be absorbed under any one of the major religions.²⁶

Lately, in November 2017 the Indonesian Constitutional Court (*Mahkamah Constitutional*) ruled favourably on a judicial review of the articles of the Civil Administration Law related to the acknowledgment of Indigenous sects/beliefs on the personal identity card (KTP). As informed earlier, the status of the Indigenous sects was not clear and their religious status on the identity card is either blank or to be attached under any one of the six official religions in Indonesia.²⁷ Indeed, it is a complicated issue in the context of Indonesia, for the reason of whether these sects could be recognized as religion or not. It is because the term religion implies a set of belief systems that include the belief in God, scripture, and prophethood while these sects lack one or more of these criteria.²⁸ Din Syamsudin criticized the decision of the Constitutional Court to rule in favour of the Indigenous sect's followers to grant their religion mentioned in their identity card which was done by the Court without consultation with the parliament.

Another issue related to the Indigenous sects is marriage legitimation, whereby they could not register their marriage legally due to their uncertain status about their 'religion'. The marriage ceremony is normally solemnized before the *qadi* (cleric) or the priest to legitimize their marriage, however, in the case of the sects they may not have a recognized leader. Hence, in most cases, they resorted to the civil court to register their marriage instead of the religious court. Religious tolerance is another issue concerning religious conversion. Indonesia adopts the freedom of choosing the religion or conversion whether from another

²⁶Ali, "Aliran Kepercayaan Semakin Mendapat Legitimasi Hukum," *Https://Www.Hukumonline.Com/*, 2010, <https://www.hukumonline.com/berita/a/aliran-kepercayaan-semakin-mendapat-legitimasi-hukum-1t4ba746a098f9c/>.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Tika Azaria, "Din Syamsuddin: Sidang MK Soal Kolom Agama Seolah Diam-Diam" (Jakarta, 2017), <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1036250/din-syamsuddin-sidang-mk-soal-kolom-agama-seolah-diam-diam>.

religion to Islam or the other way. It is guaranteed by the state constitution named *Undang Undang Dasar* (UUD) '45. Even though Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country, the right to the freedom of religion is equal for all religions. There are no specific religious acts regulating the conversion of religion either for Islam as well as for other religions. However, if the case is related to blasphemy, it could be charged under section 156 under the criminal laws which include mocking, derogating, or insulting the religion. Such a case is covered under the blasphemy act because Indonesia is not an Islamic state whereby Islam is not declared as its formal religion and its constitution.²⁹

This situation is different in Malaysia where Islam has been declared as the State's official religion and Islamic laws are binding for the Muslims.³⁰ This fact is reflected in the formulation of Islamic laws, Islamic courts, and the empowerment of Islamic institutions such as the formation of *Majlis Agama Islam* (Islamic Council) at the state level, the appointment of *Mufti* (cleric), the allocation of the budgets for the religious officers as well as the position of the *Sultan* as a head of religious affairs in each state.³¹ So, all religious affairs are referred to the *Sultan* as the highest authority of Islamic affairs at the state level and *Agung* (the Supreme head of the King) at the national level. Consequently, by having these institutions religious affairs are systematically managed and administered. Apart from that, the *Sharia* laws are also formulated and enforced, especially in family laws and the administration of *zakat* (obligatory alms), *infaq* (recommendatory alms), and *waqaf* (will) as well as the management of the mosques and *suraus*.

Consequently, issues such as deviant teachings and sects, proselytization, conversion, and other issues are regulated by the *Shari'ah* laws and managed by the Islamic institution. The freedom of religion in Malaysia is guaranteed according to the Federal constitution article 11: Article 11 of the Federal Constitution: (1) Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it. (2) No person shall be compelled to pay any tax the proceeds of which are specially allocated in whole or in part for a religion other than his own. (3) Every religious group has the right (a) to manage its religious affairs; (b) to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and (c) to acquire and own property and hold and administer it by law. (4) State

²⁹Dewi Romantika Tinambunan and Yakobus Ndona, "Konteks Histori Yang Menyebabkan Lahirnya Rumusan Sila Pertama Pancasila," *RISOMA : Jurnal Riset Sosial Humaniora Dan Pendidikan* 2, no. 4 (2024): 148–54, <https://doi.org/10.62383/risoma.v2i4.135>.

³⁰CommonLII, "Constitution of Malaysia 1957," 1957, <http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/const/1957/1.html>.

³¹Farid Sufian Shuaib, "Pentadbiran Dan Institusi Islam Di Malaysia: Cadangan Ke Arah Pemantapan," *Kanun-Jurnal Undang-Undang Malaysia* 1, no. 22 (2009): 12-28., <http://irep.iium.edu.my/11655/>.

law and in respect of the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan, and Putrajaya, federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam. (5) This Article does not authorize any act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health or morality.

Consequently, based on the above acts, there are certain limitations on the freedom of religion in Malaysia, firstly, the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among Muslims and the freedom of religion must not result in an act contrary to any common laws relating to public order, public health, and morality. This fact is also in line with the opinion of Osman Bakar that in the Malaysian constitution, there are boundaries of religious tolerance. The boundaries are the constitutional provision of Islam as the religion of the Federation and the identification of Malay ethnicity with Islam. Despite these boundaries, there is vast public space for practical expressions and the realization of higher forms of religious tolerance in the country.³²

The issue of defiant teachings in Malaysia is subjected to the *fatwa* (verdict) of the *Mufti* (cleric) as well as the National Fatwa Council to issue the decree/fatwa on a particular case. The decision of the National Fatwa Council is the highest one above the state fatwa council however it could be adopted by the state fatwa if they agree on the decision. The formal theology in Malaysia is Sunni (*Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jama'ah*) and it is declared as the official theology of the country. Hence any other theology of Islam is considered unlawful, and it could not be practiced accordingly. The fatwa council had issued several *fatwas* (decrees) on deviant teachings and subsequently it had been declared by the council and published by the religious authority. Consequently, if a certain sect or group is regarded as illegal, its propagation is also prohibited such as the Shi'ism and Ahmadiyah/Qadiyani sects. Apart from that there are dozens of deviant sects declared as illegal since the establishment of the council be it at the national or state level.

Along with the freedom of religion adopted in Malaysia religious conversion is accordingly permissible but it should follow the procedure embraced by the religious authority. However, for the case of the conversion of the Muslim, it is restricted by the state religious law. There are different approaches adopted by each state in Malaysia according to the fatwa made by the state religious authority as the state has an independent religious administration.

³² Osman Bakar, "The Evolving Face of Religious Tolerance in Post-Colonial Malaysia :," *Icrjournal* 02, no. 4 (2017): 621–38, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v2i4.602>.

In the case of Perak, apostasy is defined as "any Muslim who by his word or conduct whatsoever intentionally claims to cease to profess the religion of Islam or declares himself to be non-Muslim." The offense could be punished with up to two years imprisonment or a fine of up to RM 2000. Pahang state could charge heavier of up to 3 years imprisonment or RM 5000 fines, while Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, and Sabah used different approaches in detaining the individual for rehabilitation purposes.³³ In the case of the conversion of a Muslim wife or husband to another religion, the couple could be separated or divorced after hearing the decision of the Islamic court and not automatically. The rule is also applicable to either the non-Muslim wife or husband who converted to Islam and the marriage could be revoked.³⁴ Based on the Islamic laws implemented in Malaysia conversion of a Muslim to another religion is regarded as a serious matter, since it has serious implications on social and family life. The law is made based on the fact that the conversion to Islam could not be done by force or oppression and consequently, the reversion from it is punishable and could not be done easily.

The Philippines

The Philippines, a predominantly Christian nation, has adopted the principle of freedom of religion as outlined in the UN Constitution. Its constitution guarantees religious freedom and prohibits the establishment of a state religion. The Philippines upholds the freedom of religion as a fundamental human right. As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the country is committed to respecting and promoting this right.³⁵ In recent decades, there has been a significant evolution in government policies and programs initiated by a select group of legislators within the Philippine Congress and Senate, aimed at promoting peace and justice, particularly among the Muslim minority communities.³⁶ These legislative measures have provided a crucial framework for peace advocates across the nation, offering foundational principles that have redefined the core tenets of religious rights within the context of a multicultural society.³⁷

³³ Nor Ashikin Md Nasir and Siti Zubaidah Ismail, "Keluar Agama Islam Di Malaysia: Permasalahan Dari Sudut Undang-Undang," *Journal of Shariah Law Research* 1, no. 1 (2016): 141–54, <https://doi.org/10.22452/jslr.vol1no1.8>.

³⁴ (The Commissioner Of Law Revision, 2006)

³⁵ Freedom, "PHILIPPINES 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT."

³⁶ Erasiah et al., "A Historical Overview of Muslim Minority Identity and Positioning in the Philippines," *Tsaqofah* 21, no. 1 (2023): 67–84, <https://doi.org/10.32678/tsaqofah.v21i1.7966>.

³⁷ Mariam Saidona Tagoranao and Alizaman D. Gamon, "Understanding the Religious Rights of the Muslims in the Philippines: A Catalyst for Peace and Justice," *Journal of Islam in Asia* 16, no. 1 (2019), <https://journals.iium.edu.my/jiasia/index.php/jia>.

The 1987 Philippine Constitution enshrines the principle of religious freedom, explicitly prohibiting the establishment of a state religion and ensuring the unimpeded exercise of religious beliefs. Article III, Section 5 of the Constitution affirms that no law shall be enacted respecting an establishment of religion or inhibiting its free exercise, thereby safeguarding the rights of Muslims, along with other religious groups, to practice their faith without discrimination. The Constitution also mandates a strict separation between church and state, reinforcing the impartiality of the government in religious matters.

Despite the inherent challenges embedded in various government policies concerning the administration of cultural affairs for Muslim minority communities in the Philippines, the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF), established under Republic Act No. 9997, has been instrumental in advancing the nation's pursuit of meaningful social integration. The National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) has played a pivotal role in advancing interfaith dialogue and resolving conflicts through a civilizational renewal approach, significantly contributing to cultural harmony and diversity. This approach utilizes interfaith dialogue as a means of peacebuilding and conflict resolution, which has proven effective in various global contexts. NCMF's efforts align with global trends in leveraging interfaith dialogue to address religious tensions and foster understanding across different cultural and religious groups. In line with the research conducted the Interfaith dialogue has also played a crucial role in international diplomacy, facilitating cooperation and reducing religious tensions globally.³⁸ The NCMF's efforts reflect these broader trends, emphasizing neutrality, respect, and mutual understanding.

The National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) plays a crucial role in fostering understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the Philippines. This effort is highly significant in a country with a complex history of tensions and cultural diversity. NCMF undertakes various initiatives focused on education, legal pluralism, and interreligious dialogue, all of which serve as bridges to unite cultural differences and promote peace. In line with what was written by The National Commission on Muslim Filipinos (NCMF) plays a crucial role in fostering understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the Philippines.³⁹ This effort is highly significant in a country with a complex history of tensions and cultural diversity. NCMF undertakes various initiatives focused on education, legal pluralism, and interreligious dialogue, all of which serve as

³⁸ Siahaya (2023)

³⁹ Abdul Haiy Abdul Sali, "Sociological Understanding of Muslim Education in Multicultural Philippines," *Dinamika Ilmu* 23, no. 1 (2023): 105–22, ERIC.

bridges to unite cultural differences and promote peace. The establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) through the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) represents a significant outcome of the Philippines' two-decade peace process with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Recognizing the socio-economic disparities between Muslim and Christian communities in Mindanao, the BOL was collaboratively developed by Muslim and non-Muslim policymakers to enhance the region's autonomy and self-governance. The BARMM's parliamentary system allows for the enactment of laws aligned with Islamic principles, which is crucial for institutionalizing religious rights for Muslims. This legal framework is intended to protect public interest, and human dignity, and promote peace and development within the society.⁴⁰

As the discourse on religious tolerance gains increasing attention from policymakers across Southeast Asia, the Philippine government has actively supported various educational and interfaith initiatives aimed at fostering religious understanding. Among these, the Madrasah Education Program stands out for its critical role in integrating Islamic education into the national curriculum. This program ensures that Muslim students receive instruction that is both culturally relevant and consistent with their religious beliefs. The government's recognition of the importance of Islamic education and madrasah programs has led to significant investments aimed at empowering *asatids* (Muslim teachers). The Philippine government has made significant strides in accommodating madrasah educational institutions within the national education system. This integration is based on a combination of knowledge and cultural integration, which requires educators to present Islamic education that is closely aligned with students' lives.⁴¹

Furthermore, the government's commitment to the global call for peace and development through religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue is evident in its support for initiatives like the National Ulama Conference of the Philippines (NUCP), which facilitates discussions among Muslim religious leaders on national issues and strengthens ties between diverse religious communities. Recognizing that extremism can be linked to economic deprivation among certain groups, the Philippine Government has introduced programs designed to uplift the economic and social development of Muslim communities. These

⁴⁰Anwar Muhammad Radiamoda, "Works of Faith-Based Leaders on the Principles of Islamic Law for Preventing and Transforming Violent Extremism," *INNOVATIO: Journal for Religious Innovation Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.30631/innovatio.v22i1.150>.

⁴¹Roni Putra, "Analysis of Educational Policy and Its Implementation on the Autonomous Territory of the Moro Nation: Challenges and Transformation," *Edusoshum: Journal of Islamic Education and Social Humanities* 3, no. 2 (2023): 67–74, <https://doi.org/10.52366/edusoshum.v3i2.69>.

initiatives play a crucial role in fostering religious understanding and mitigating factors that contribute to extremism. Initiatives such as the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) and other poverty alleviation measures are strategically designed to address the specific needs of Muslim communities, ensuring that economic and social development efforts are both inclusive and culturally sensitive. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) has been pivotal in this regard, working closely with national programs to tailor interventions that meet the unique needs of its diverse population. By tackling the socio-economic challenges faced by these communities, these programs not only enhance their quality of life but also play a crucial role in reducing tensions and fostering religious tolerance. Through their contributions to social harmony and peaceful coexistence, these initiatives, supported by BARMM, help build a more integrated and cohesive society.

The commitment of the government to promoting understanding and fostering coexistence is reflected in its various policies. By upholding religious rights and encouraging interfaith dialogue, the Philippines aims to address historical grievances, reduce religious tensions, and build a more peaceful and just society for all citizens, regardless of their faith. Ensuring the legal protection of religious rights, supporting interfaith dialogue, and addressing the unique needs of Muslim communities are key steps towards creating a more inclusive society where diverse religious groups can coexist harmoniously. These efforts not only safeguard religious rights but also act as a catalyst for peace and justice, bridging divides and nurturing mutual respect among the nation's diverse population.

Myanmar

Myanmar is predominantly Buddhist, with a diverse population encompassing significant Christian, Hindu, and Muslim minorities. Its constitution guarantees the freedom of every citizen to profess and practice their religion subject to public order, morality, and public order according to the Constitution. However, Myanmar has been criticized for its policies against minorities, especially against the minority Muslims of the Rohingya ethnic in Rakhine state. The Myanmar government even was accused of ethnic cleansing by the world for its atrocities against the Rohingya ethnic population. Over 700,000 Rohingya Muslims were compelled to flee for their lives to neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh, in a mass exodus that began in 2017. This event underscored a long-standing pattern of religious marginalization faced by the Rohingya in Myanmar, a nation with a predominantly Buddhist population. While the plight of the Rohingya has garnered international attention, it is crucial to recognize that discrimination against religious

minorities in Myanmar extends beyond this specific group. Christians and Hindus also face various forms of religious oppression, including restrictions on religious practices, limitations on freedom of movement, closures of places of worship, and difficulties obtaining permits for religious construction or repairs. Furthermore, reports suggest discrimination in employment and housing opportunities based on religious affiliation.⁴² Although freedom of religion, and equality in ethical rights are constitutionally documented, they have discriminated against the freedom and liberty of the Muslims as compared to its non-Muslim citizens. On the ground, their rights are ignored, and their religious identity is hardly regarded.

In reality, they encounter substantial challenges in maintaining their religious identity. Their political presence appears weak, as no Muslim is employed in any political institution in Myanmar of their own volition. They were no more independent than the time they used to participate in the political process of the country before military rule (1962). They rendered their services as military commanders, political advisors, parliamentarians, managers, ministers, and developers during the period of the Myanmar kingdom as well as in the British administration. Muslims' involvement, particularly in the struggle for independence of Myanmar during British rule and in the period of post-independence, cannot be ignored. They performed very well in the economy, making them creative forces in the field of politics in Myanmar. General Aung San, a key figure in Myanmar's fight for independence, is frequently recognized for his inclusive attitude towards various ethnic and religious communities, including Muslims. His partnership with Muslim associates, like U Pe Khin, underscores a historical moment in Myanmar where political discourse embraced religious and ethnic diversity. Written by General Aung San's leadership was characterized by his efforts to unite various ethnic and religious groups in Myanmar.⁴³ He recognized the importance of inclusivity in the nation's independence movement and worked closely with Muslim leaders like U Pe Khin, who played a significant role in the negotiations for Burma's independence from British colonial rule.⁴⁴

However, the government has failed to recognize the sacrifices of Muslims and dispelled them from all key positions of the government. In short, their life today become

⁴² US Department of State, "2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Burma" (Burma, 2019), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/burma/>.

⁴³ Yusuf (2018)

⁴⁴ Min Naing, *Struggle for Burmese Independence: Myanmar Muslims*, (Yangon: Islamic Academic Center, Academic Press, 2011), 320.

Takkato Ne Win, "The First Pinlon Conference," *Working People Daily*, 12, February, 1986, p. 1.

miserable, and they live in a challenging situation. Another tragedy for Muslims is that their economic status has also declined to the lowest level. No Muslim banker nor big-scale trader has been left since nationalization in 1962. The number of poor, jobless, impoverished, uneducated, illiterates, refugees, and locally displaced Muslims is on the rise. The social status and welfare of the Muslim population are at a shocking stage, where many unwanted stories and ill-faith events against Muslims are being witnessed repeatedly.⁴⁵

The educational status of many Muslims is also concerning, as many cannot afford better education for their children. Many of them, being illiterate and impoverished do not know the importance of education; thus at least 50% of Muslim children go again illiterate, which is valid for the children living in rural ethnically administrative areas. The rest of the 50% of Muslim children hardly finished their secondary education as the cost was relatively high as well as the job certainty after their graduation was also not sure. A quarter of children would finish their secondary level of education in government schools. The educational attainment of Muslims in Burma, now recognized as Myanmar, remains quite inadequate, shaped by a complex mix of historical, socio-political, and economic influences. The difficulties encountered by Muslims in accessing education reflect a wider issue of educational underdevelopment that impacts numerous ethnic and religious communities in the nation. This scenario is further aggravated by systemic problems within Myanmar's education framework and the socio-political marginalization faced by minority groups, including Muslims. While acknowledging their role in educating many prominent Burmese figures, the text recognizes the criticism faced by missionaries from some nationalists. However, it does not provide an assessment of the educational status of Muslims or any other specific ethnic or religious group in Burma.⁴⁶ Therefore, the claim regarding the unsatisfactory education level of Muslims.

The mandatory teaching of Buddhist principles, ethical values, and fundamental doctrines to all students, including Muslim children, in Burma (Myanmar) illustrates a complex interaction of religious, political, and cultural dynamics. This educational policy is deeply embedded in the historical and contemporary socio-political landscape of Myanmar, where Buddhism serves not only as a religion but also as a significant cultural and political force. The enforcement of Buddhist teachings on Muslim students raises important questions regarding religious freedom, minority rights, and the role of religion in state affairs.

⁴⁵ Mikael Gravers, "An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power," in *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*, 1st Editio (London: Routledge, 1999), 168, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203639795>.

⁴⁶ Pum, Za (2022)

According to the integration of Buddhist teachings into the educational system in Myanmar is influenced by the historical intertwining of Buddhism with Burmese identity and governance.⁴⁷ Historically, Burmese monarchs have revered Buddhist principles, and these have been used to legitimize political power.

Although Muslims are allowed to observe their culture, tradition, and religious activities to a certain extent, many impediments at every level of their lives are always encountered. The creation of disregard towards Muslim culture such as wearing a *Hijab*, and the head scuff for Muslim women has become an issue causing an inferiority complex among many Muslims. Frustration can be seen in the faces of many Muslim graduates whose job applications were turned down by the employers for being Muslims as the Buddhists were given priority. Muslim population grew more extensive, but their places of prayer, Masjids did not grow for building a new Masjid is not allowed. There are many places where Muslims cannot perform their religious prayers, rituals, and spiritual duties freely, particularly in rural areas and satellite towns. Import of Al-Qur'an and religious books is strictly prohibited as well as publishing of religious books is hardly allowed, but they attempted it with great difficulties.⁴⁸

Building or renovating religious buildings, and Islamic educational institutions such as *madrasahs*, schools, community centres, colleges or universities are critical issues for Muslims. Many religious buildings are ageing and in disrepair, yet no one acts to grant permission for their renovation. Only one or two cases are approved each year, and even then, they face numerous challenges before receiving authorization.⁴⁹

Besides, slaughtering the animals at the time of their *Eid* festivals, and travel arrangements on *Hajj*, the pilgrimage was difficult for the Muslims previously. However, now according to the local Muslims, the regulation has been softened well, but still, bribery and favouritism are some of the impediments, they have to go through compulsorily.⁵⁰ With regards to calling for prayer "*Adan*", holding Islamic talks in public places, and arranging workshops, conferences, and seminars on Islam is not allowed. Permission for these activities, in any case, is not granted. Even if given, it is at the eleventh hour or the last

⁴⁷ Jamie S. Scott, "Burmese Governance and the Buddhist Ironies of U Win Pe's 'Clean, Clear Water,'" *SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English* 57, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.22452/sare.vol57no1.12>.

⁴⁸ All this information is the result of interviews with prominent Muslim leaders from Burma (2010-2013), whose names are withheld for security reasons.

⁴⁹ U Khin Myint was head of the trusty of Jami Mosque situated at the downtown of Yangon. He was interviewed on 2-1-2012.

⁵⁰ Interview with U Kyaw Nyein, member of the Qurbani Central Committee, interviewed on 23-2-2012.

possible moment to discourage its implementation.⁵¹ The appalling threat for the Muslims is religious-based instigation, and discriminative hate speeches purposely disseminated by some Buddhist monks cause a tremendous blow to the Muslim community. From 2012 to 2017, several tragedies were suffered by the Muslims living in many cities of Myanmar, particularly Meitthila, Larsho, Mandalay, and Rakhine region. Destruction of lives and properties and the removal of thousands of Muslims from their homeland are reported worldwide.⁵²

The difficulties described above are genuine for Muslims as long as they remain loyal to their belief because Islam is considered unsafe for Buddhists. Consequently, Islamophobia manufactures the policy of assimilation carrying a socio-political strategy aiming to dominate the country's ethnic and religious minorities. Thus, every problem of the Muslims today in Burma is linked to the policy of assimilation, which is not documented in the constitution but is frequently highlighted in local newspapers.⁵³ However, Jean Berlie wrote in his book that: "during the period of globalization, religion is an important factor in the creation and consolidation of people's Identity and an element of sub-cultural integration, which may be considered problematic by politicians for the integration of emerging states. The rulers of Myanmar who belong to one dominant group (Bamar) and their religion being Buddhism made it a *de facto* state religion." The actual position on the ground is that the State does not protect Muslims and other religious minorities. The Muslim population is subject to *Burmanization*, which is a socio-political strategy aiming at the assimilation of the ethnic and religious minorities of Myanmar. Since Muslims and other minorities are being subjected to discrimination and assimilation into one dominant ethnic Burmese strategy, it is challenging to maintain religious Identity for all religious and ethnic groups in Myanmar.⁵⁴

All these difficulties and impediments mentioned earlier carried a strong foundation of hatred between the followers of Islam and Buddhism. Since the foundation of hatred stepped up to further distance beyond the threshold of Muslims where maintaining Islamic religious Identity has been difficult. Muslims claim that their co-religionist, the Buddhists

⁵¹ Maulana Akbar Shah, "Islam in the China Sea: Muslims in Myanmar (Islam Di Sekitar Laut China: Orang Islam Di Myanmar)," *International Islam University Malaysia* 16, no. April (2019): 5–24, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v16i1.777>.

⁵² Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy within Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim "Other"* (London: Zed Books, 2017), https://discovered.ed.ac.uk/discovery/fulldisplay?vid=44UOE_INST:44UOE_VU2&tab=Everything&docid=alma9924139853302466&searchScope=default_scope&context=L&lang=en.

⁵³ P Ramasamy K Kesavapany, A Mani, *Rising India and Indian Communities in East Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), <https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/1198>.

⁵⁴ Jean A. Berlie, *The Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslims*, 1 Edition (Banglamung Chonburi 20150 Thailand: WhiteLotus Ltd., 2008), <https://www.whitelotusbooks.com/>.

generally feel that their activities and Islamic culture have been intolerant and unfriendly. The Buddhists further claim that Muslims' presence contributes to an unhealthy relationship between them. Therefore, Muslims most of the time, feel insecure living among hostile neighbours, signifying uncertainty and difficulty in the process of upholding Islamic religious Identity for Muslims in the environment of non-Muslim majority, particularly the Buddhists.

The transition of power to the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2016, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, was met with high expectations from the people of Myanmar, including the Muslim community, who hoped for equality, transparency, and justice. However, the reality of Myanmar's political landscape, deeply influenced by military dominance and ethnic tensions, presented significant challenges to these aspirations. Myanmar's diverse ethnic and religious landscape, including the Rohingya Muslim minority, has been a source of ongoing conflict. The NLD government, despite its democratic mandate, faced criticism for failing to protect the Rohingya from ethnic cleansing and genocide, which were exacerbated by anti-Rohingya sentiment and military actions.⁵⁵

Although the Muslims are well-informed about the present state of the country, their historic political struggle and the injustices experienced under the military rules are something that cannot be easily forgotten. Looking into the fragile condition of the country at the moment, Muslims are cautiously waiting for a much more favourable time to negotiate with the current government. They do not want to take illegal favours and opportunities, except willing to enjoy justice for their survival in the land of their ancestors. Myanmar is their homeland or motherland; they wish to live and die in this land because they have no place to go nor wish to migrate to any other land. Muslims have committed to cooperate with the new government, and they earnestly seek cooperation from the government to uphold equality and non-discriminative policies.

Religious Extremism in South-East Asia

One of the most crucial issues related to religious tolerance is the issue of extremism. Religious extremism has become a major concern of the world in the last decade due to various incidents and tragedies witnessed today. Southeast Asia is not exempted from the issue due to several incidents that took place in the region related to religious extremism.

⁵⁵ Iqthyer Uddin Md Zahed, "Aung San Suu Kyi and Ethnic Cleansing: The Dark Side of 'Myanmar Way' Democracy," *South East Asia Research* 30, no. 2 (2022): 202–218, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2022.2086062>.

However, compared to other regions, the scale of the violent acts resulting from this act is relatively low. Religious extremism is defined in various ways and one prominent definition of extremism as a motivation for terrorism is that extremism comprises ideological beliefs about an obligation to bring back the political system to a form suggested by religious norms through violence.⁵⁶ An extremist is defined as one who advocates or resorts to measures beyond the norm, especially in politics. Religious extremism should be looked into from different angles not only from its 'Religious' aspect only. It is because the 'religious violence' that took place could be the outcome of certain problems or issues that resulted in the violent act. Some researchers assumed that religious extremism originated from religious doctrines per se by ignoring the causes that drive them to do the action.

Religious extremism is driven by different causes such as economic and political oppression, discrimination, as well as religious indoctrination or misinterpretation of religious texts. An example is the Bali bombing in 2002 which cost the lives of more than 200 people. According to Imam Samudra, the main suspect is that his action is justifiable as revenge for the US killing of the Muslims. A similar bombing took place on Jakarta's outskirts that carried a similar trademark.⁵⁷ Another example is the Roman Catholic cathedral in Southern Philippines on 27 January 2019 that killed more than 20 people and wounded 111 others during a Sunday mass.⁵⁸ The attack came nearly a week after minority Muslims in the predominantly Roman Catholic nation endorsed a new autonomous region in the southern Philippines in hopes of ending nearly five decades of a conflict that has left 150,000 people dead. However, despite the acceptance of the majority for the deal some sectarian groups seem to reject it.

Such incidents show that the act of extremism has various motives be it political, economic, or social. The case of the southern Philippines has a long history of struggle of the Muslim minority in Mindanao Island to gain autonomy status. It happened after the fierce domestic war in Marawi in 2017 that left more than 1,100 people dead by the attack of the government troops. Another issue of extremism could be witnessed in Southern Thai areas whereby the Muslims remain a minority group in the majority Buddhist country. Despite the smaller scale of violence that took place throughout these years there, but it could be a

⁵⁶ Arrigo BA Arena MP, "Social Psychology, Terrorism, and Identity: A Preliminary Re-Examination of Theory, Culture, Self, and Society," *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 23, no. 4 (2005): 485–506, <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.653>.

⁵⁷ BBC, "Timeline: Bali Bomb Trials" (Bali, 2015), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3126241.stm>.

⁵⁸ Associated Press, "20 Dead After Bombing of Cathedral in Southern Philippines," 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/20-dead-after-bombing-of-cathedral-in-southern-philippines/>.

case to be observed and analyzed objectively from different angles. In the case of violence in Southern Philippines, it could be observed that political issues remain a dominant reason for the conflict in addition to the economic and social reasons. This is because Mindanao Island and its surrounding islands are dominated by the Muslim minority in the Philippines.

Despite the freedom of religion that the Philippine government adopted in the country however, the secular system and the constitution that does not accommodate the political inspiration of the Muslim minority in Mindanao had instigated the struggle movement in the Muslim-dominated province. Apart from that the economic disparities, lack of education and its facilities as well as the high rate of unemployment had been blamed for the cause of extremism and radicalization in the area.⁵⁹ The situation could be similar to the Timor-Leste case whereby they chose to split from Indonesia in 1998 after more than 20 years under Indonesian rule. Timor Leste is an island with a majority of Catholic followers that was conquered by the Portuguese for more than a hundred years. Likewise, the Southern Thai region is still witnessing violent incidents despite its smaller scale. Four provinces in Southern Thailand are dominated by Muslims who are struggling to keep their identities and culture. It could be observed through the domination of Thai identity as well as its language, culture, and economy. The violence was stirred by long-running grievances of the Malay Muslim community in the area who claimed to experience systematic discrimination in local governance, political marginalization, forced assimilation to the national Thai identity, and abuses of the local population by security forces and state officials. Despite the different efforts of the Thai government to develop the area economically and socially yet this effort is not enough to reverse the legacy of grievance and resistance. The subnational conflict in Southern Thai is quite similar to another subnational conflict in Asia in terms of prolonged low-intensity violence, contestation over state authority in the region, fragmented resistance groups, low level of international involvement, and major constraints in providing international assistance due to government sensitivities.

Looking at the nature of religious extremism in Southeast Asia it could be remarked that the religious extremism that took place in Southeast Asia is not necessarily ‘religious’ in nature. Rather, it is driven by various factors that blend, leading to violent actions. In the case of minority Muslims in some ASEAN countries, the motives of the violence could be political and economic inequality, discrimination, or oppression. It is a misleading perception to generalize that the violent action committed by some Muslims in the area is

⁵⁹ Mariam Saidona Tagoranao and Alizaman D. Gamon, “Understanding the Religious Rights of the Muslims in the Philippines: A Catalyst for Peace and Justice.”

always motivated by religious reasons. It is because a similar action could be carried out by other communities in Southeast Asia and the world for various reasons. Identifying the right reason for each phenomenon could lead to finding the right solution to each problem. Similarly, the major reason for the violence and extremism acts in Southeast Asia could not simply be associated with religious reasons to find the right solution to the regional problem as well as the global one.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is evident that religious tolerance is a multifaceted issue that extends beyond its basic definition. While there is broad agreement among nations on the importance of religious tolerance, its interpretation and application differ significantly due to varying religious beliefs, social structures, and national interests. It is essential to understand that religious freedom cannot be universally applied through a single lens, as each nation's unique context influences its approach, while still upholding the core principle of religious freedom. Southeast Asia, as a dynamic region, remains committed to the fundamental human rights of religious freedom and tolerance despite ongoing challenges such as violence, discrimination, and extremism. While some countries in the region may continue to practice discriminatory actions against certain ethnic or religious groups, these issues often stem from deeper problems such as economic inequality, political repression, and social discrimination, rather than solely from religious motivations. The impact of violence and extremism affects individuals across various demographics, including both Muslims and non-Muslims. Therefore, addressing these issues requires a nuanced approach that considers their root causes rather than attributing them exclusively to religious factors. To promote religious tolerance and enhance social harmony in Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines, the current study puts forward the following recommendations: Firstly, it is crucial to create and promote policies that are inclusive of all religious and ethnic groups. These policies should ensure that everyone has equal rights and opportunities, which is key to building a fair and just society. Secondly, it is imperative to advance interfaith dialogue through active support and facilitation by governments and key community leaders. Such dialogue is essential for fostering mutual understanding, respect, and collaboration among diverse religious groups. A critical component of this initiative is the integration of knowledge that emphasizes the core principles of humanity within policy frameworks. Thirdly, there is an urgent need for the implementation of sincere and transparent government policies aimed at addressing socio-economic disparities. These disparities,

prevalent in many Southeast Asian countries, are significant contributors to tensions and conflicts that foster religious intolerance among communities. Thus, prioritizing equitable economic development and advancing social justice can alleviate sources of unrest. Fourthly, a more robust legal framework is imperative to safeguard religious freedoms and forestall discrimination. The establishment of effective mechanisms for redressing grievances and enforcing rights is crucial for upholding social justice and equality. Fifthly, it is essential to invest in educational programs that cultivate tolerance and respect for diversity. Emphasizing early education that promotes a culture of understanding and inclusivity is crucial for fostering long-term societal harmony and nurturing a generation committed to religious tolerance. Such initiatives should be designed to address the region's unique cultural contexts, aiming to build a foundation of mutual respect and coexistence across different religious and ethnic groups. Lastly, in recognition of Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines as multicultural societies, it is crucial to strengthen regional cooperation on initiatives designed to promote meaningful religious tolerance. Emphasizing cultural and civilizational understanding as the foundational basis for these efforts will enhance their effectiveness. By sharing best practices, strategies, and resources, and incorporating cultural insights into collaborative frameworks, member states can create more effective solutions. This approach addresses immediate challenges while fostering deeper mutual respect and cultural appreciation, resulting in a stronger and more unified regional response.

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