ISLAM, ETHNICITY AND THE STATE:
Identity Politics in Malaysian Public Policy

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KEYWORD	ABSTRACT
Identity Politics, Malay-Muslim, Malaysia, Minority Discrimination	*This research analyzes identity politics in religion-based public policy in Malaysia as a case study in Southeast Asia. Using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis approach, this research explores how Malay-Islam is hegemonically positioned in the constitution and state practice through institutions such as Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) and the dual justice system. The findings show that this dominant discourse influences various sectors of public policy, especially education and law, which has implications for discrimination against non-Muslim minorities. The study also identifies the emergence of counter-discourses from civil society organizations that fight for pluralism and justice, although they are often silenced through recontextualization strategies by the state. This research contributes to the understanding of how identity politics operates in multicultural and multi-religious contexts, and its implications for public policy in the Southeast Asian region.*

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is a highly plural region in terms of ethnicity, religion and culture (Al Qurtuby, 2015). In the midst of this diversity, religion is not only a spiritual dimension, but also a political instrument that is often used in the construction of collective identity. In the context of modern nation-states, especially post-colonial ones, Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar show a tendency to integrate religion in public policy-both normatively and instrumentally (Pratama, 2022). This phenomenon shows the complex and often problematic dynamics of identity politics.

Religious-based identity politics develops in line with the state's efforts to shape the legitimacy of power and the loyalty of citizens (Eleazer et al., 2022; Herianto & Wijanarko, 2022). On the one hand, public policies that accommodate the majority religion are often claimed as a form of affirmation of national identity. But on the other hand, this tendency can widen social inequalities, create discrimination against minority groups, and even strengthen sectarianism (Lestari, 2018). In practice, this kind of policy comes in the form of regulations on religious education, funding for houses of worship, formal recognition of certain religions, and restrictions on the expression of minority groups' beliefs.

One clear example of religion-based identity politics can be found in Malaysia. Formally, Malaysia makes Islam the official state religion, although it still recognizes the existence of other religions. This very central position of Islam is reflected in various aspects of public policy (Nurhuda, 2022). The state established a highly Islamic institutional structure, such as the Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) and a sharia judicial system that coexists with the civil law system. Many

public policies-from education, to economy, to culture-explicitly refer to Islam as a national identity, such as in the Islam Hadhari program, affirmative policies for Muslim Bumiputera, and the Islamic education curriculum in public schools (Abdul Salam, 2019; Fauzi Abdul Hamid & Ismail, 2014).

Furthermore, in Malaysia, ethnicity and religion are strongly intertwined: to be Malay is to be Muslim. This makes the issue of religion and ethnicity highly sensitive in politics and public policy (Bustamam Ahmad, 2011). The main criticism of this configuration comes from non-Muslim minority groups such as Chinese and Indians who often feel discriminated against or excluded in state policies. This phenomenon raises serious questions about equal citizenship and social justice in a multicultural society.

The study of identity politics in religion-based public policies is important to dissect the power relations between the state, religion and civil society. By focusing on Southeast Asia, this paper seeks to understand how the dynamics of public policies influenced by religious identity politics shape socio political structures in various countries. In addition, this study will also explore the responses of civil society, minority groups, and religious actors to these policies, whether in the form of resistance, negotiation, or adaptation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research uses an interdisciplinary approach by combining theories from political science, sociology, and public policy studies to understand religious-based identity politics in state policy formation. In particular, there are three main theoretical foundations that serve as the framework for analysis: *First*, Identity Politics Theory. Identity politics theory fundamentally explains how collective identities - whether based on ethnicity, religion, culture, gender, or other social categories - are articulated and mobilized as the basis for political demands, solidarity building, and power legitimization (Ejobowah & Kymlicka, 1997; Taylor, 1994). Identity is not just a passive characteristic of a group, but also a social construction that is shaped, negotiated, and often contested in the political arena. In the context of Southeast Asian countries, religious identity politics often emerges as a strategy used by the state and political actors to build legitimacy and stability of power, as well as form a narrative of national identity that integrates and marginalizes certain groups.

According to Manuel Castells (2004, 2010), identity can function as a tool of domination or resistance, depending on who controls the identity construction process. Identities controlled by state actors and the dominant majority have the potential to become instruments of hegemony that reinforce their position of power and limit the space for minority groups to move. Conversely, subordinate groups can also use their identities to resist marginalization and demand recognition. In the case of Malaysia, the state has systematically used the Islamic-Malay identity as the main pillar in nation-building, making it the official and dominant identity in public policy, the legal system, and socio-cultural practices (Shamsul, 1996; Weiss, 2006).

This strategy has implications for the structural exclusion of non-Malay and non-Muslim groups who not only face social marginalization, but also institutional discrimination in areas such as education, economics and law. Policies such as Bumiputera privileges for Malay Muslims, the enshrining of Islam as the state religion in the constitution, and the dualism of the civil and sharia legal systems, reinforce the hegemony of this identity. Thus, Malay-Islamic identity politics is not only a cultural symbol, but also a political tool that regulates the distribution of resources and access to state power, while shaping the boundaries of 'authenticity' and 'otherness' in Malaysia's multicultural society.

Second, Religion and State Relations Theory. The relationship between state and religion in the study of political science and sociology of religion is usually classified into several main models:

secular, accommodative and theocratic (Casanova, 2007; Dixon & Berger, 1968). The secular model asserts a total separation between religion and state affairs, where religion is considered a private matter that should not enter the realm of politics and public policy. In contrast, the theocratic model refers to the dominance of religion over the state, where religious institutions hold direct control over government and law. In the middle of these two models is the accommodative model, which marks a limited coexistence between the state and religion, where the state recognizes the existence of religion in the public sphere, but still regulates and limits the role of religion in accordance with certain political and social interests (Varacalli, 1995).

In the Malaysian context, the relationship between state and religion falls into the exclusive accommodative category. The state officially recognizes Islam as the state religion (Article 3(1) of the Malaysian Constitution), providing a very wide and protective space for this majority religion in various aspects of public life-from education, law, to socio-cultural policies-while the space for expression and recognition of minority religions is significantly limited (Hooker, 2003; Roff, 2003). This model is not only about coexistence, but also a political control mechanism that regulates and limits religious plurality in order to maintain the stability and legitimacy of state power that is synonymous with Islam Malay (Shamsul, 1996).

Jose Casanova's (2022) analytical framework of "religious publicity" is particularly relevant for understanding this phenomenon. Casanova argues that religion in the modern world does not necessarily disappear from the public sphere, but rather reactivates and becomes more active-not only as a cultural identity, but also as a political force that influences state policies and institutions. In the Malaysian context, this "publication of religion" is manifested through state interventions that strengthen the position of Islam in the modern public sphere, such as the establishment of specialized Islamic religious institutions (JAKIM) (Hamidon, 2016), the implementation of the sharia judicial system, and various policies that integrate Islamic values into the state framework (Weiss, 2006). Thus, religion is not only a symbol of identity, but also a political instrument that actively shapes and reproduces power relations in Malaysia's multicultural society.

Third, Identity-Based Public Policy Theory. Public policy is never born in a vacuum, but is the result of a complex struggle between ideologies, political interests, and social pressures that interact with each other in the state decision-making process. In the discourse of policy science, this shows that public policy is actually a product of value-laden social and political construction, not the result of mere technocratic rational logic. When the state makes religious-based policies, what happens is not just an accommodation to people's beliefs, but a process of reproduction of majority identity that is institutionalized through educational, economic, legal and cultural regulations.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) theory developed by Sabatier & Weible, (2019) and Jenkins Smith & Sabatier, (1994) provides an appropriate lens to read this dynamic. ACF emphasizes that public policies are formed through battles between advocacy coalitions consisting of actors with similar belief systems - including core beliefs, ideological values, and strategic interests. In the long run, the most politically and ideologically dominant coalition will influence the direction of state policy.

In the Malaysian context, we can see how the politico-religious coalition between state elites (especially parties such as UMNO and PAS) and state religious institutions (such as JAKIM and Majelis Agama Islam Negeri) form a hegemonic bloc that produces and perpetuates public policies based on Islamic-Malay identity. This is evident in: The national education curriculum, which makes Islamic religious studies compulsory for Muslim students, while other religious education is only provided on a limited and unequal basis in terms of funding and materials; Ethno-religious economic policies, such as the provision of Bumiputera Muslim privileges in the distribution of state contracts, scholarships, and access to property ownership; and The dominance of historical narratives in textbooks, which position Islam and Malay as the main pillars of national civilization, while marginalizing the contributions of Chinese, Indian, and non-Muslim indigenous communities

(Hefner, 2009).

This coalition not only maintains short-term political interests, but also shapes the collective imagination of "nation" and "citizen authenticity" based on religious and ethnic parameters. Consequently, non-Malays and non-Muslim groups not only experience administrative exclusion, but also cultural-they are considered not fully "Malaysian" unless they adopt the dominant values. As an implication, this ACF approach helps us understand that more inclusive policy change is not enough with moral or rational arguments, but demands the formation of a counter-coalition capable of challenging dominant belief systems through consistent advocacy, a broad social base, and strong articulation of alternative discourses.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method as the main framework in examining the construction of religion-based identity politics in public policy in Malaysia (Jabar & Yunus, 2017; Ulinnuha et al., 2013). Discourse analysis was chosen because it is able to uncover the power relations hidden in the language, symbols and narratives used by the state, religious institutions and political actors in producing and reproducing collective identities.

This type of research is an exploratory qualitative study with a focus on a single case study (Malaysia). A critical discourse analysis approach is used to explore how the construction of religion (Islam) is positioned as a major element in the national identity narrative and how it is manifested in public policies. The data in this study was obtained through: 1). Official policy documents, such as Rukun Negara, Vision 2020, Islam Hadhari document, national education policy, and JAKIM document; 2). Speeches of state officials (PM, Minister of Religious Affairs, UMNO leaders), political party documents, and institutional fatwas; 3). Media news and articles, both mainstream Malaysian media (such as The Star, Utusan Malaysia, Malaysiakini) and international sources; and 4). Legal and constitutional texts, such as Perlembagaan Malaysia Article 3 (on Islam as the official religion) and sharia law provisions.

The analysis was conducted using Norman Fairclough's (2002) approach within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, which includes three main dimensions: Textual analysis: analyzing the word choices, metaphors, religious diction, and rhetorical structures used in policy documents and speeches; Discursive practice (I. Fairclough & Fairclough, 2013): exploring how religious discourses are produced, disseminated, and maintained by state institutions; and Social practice: relating discourses to broader socio-political structures, such as the relationship between religion, ethnicity, and power in Malaysian society. To maintain validity, we used data triangulation through comparisons between official state documents, media reports and critical analysis from academics. In addition, the researcher conducted iterative reading of the texts to capture patterns and changes in the discourse that developed over time.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Islam as Official Identity: Institutionalized National Discourse

The Malaysian Constitution explicitly states that Islam is the official religion of the Federation (Article 3(1)), while recognizing freedom of religion for other religions with certain restrictions (Agustian & Saliman, 2019; Muin, 2017). This constitutional statement is not just a passive legal provision, but is the result of an active and strategic discourse production in cementing the position of Islam as the center of Malaysia's national identity. Within the framework of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, the statement functions at two main levels: as a text that has normative and symbolic meanings, and as an institutional practice that regulates the socio-political governance

of the state. Islam, thus, does not only emerge as a legal fact, but also as a dominant narrative that shapes various public policies and social practices in Malaysia.

In practice, the establishment of Islam as a state religion gave birth to various affirmative policies and special institutions that strengthen the position of this religion in the life of the nation and state. For example, the establishment of *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM), which acts as a state agency that coordinates and oversees the implementation of Islamic policies nationally, is concrete evidence of how the discourse of state Islamization is grounded in government structures (Manna, 2023). Furthermore, the sharia judicial system that runs parallel to civil law emphasizes the legal dualism that provides a special space for Islamic law in the private sphere of Muslims. This marks how the constitutional text is formulated into policies that are not only symbolic, but also practical and operational in society (Gladwin & Hofstede, 1981).

Field evidence shows that this Islamic-Malay identity narrative is internalized in various sectors, especially in education and the economy. The public school curriculum places Islamic education as a compulsory subject for Malay students, reinforcing ethnic and religious identity attachments from an early age. Programs such as *Islam Hadhari* launched by the government during the administration of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi aimed to present Islam as a moderate, progressive religion and as the foundation of national development. However, at the same time this policy solidified the position of Islam as the dominant benchmark of national identity. In the economic sphere, the Muslim Bumiputera status gives privileged access to various affirmation programs, ranging from land ownership to business development, which clearly limits the space for non-Muslim minorities to compete equally.

Scholars such as Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (2001) argue that this construction of a Malay-Islamic identity serves as a state tool to assert majority group hegemony while addressing the challenges of diversity in Malaysia's multi-ethnic society. Steven R. Wong's (2010) empirical study shows how this affirmative policy triggered social tensions and feelings of marginalization among Chinese and Indian communities who felt discriminated against in education, employment and religious freedom. Thus, the discourse practices embodied in Article 3(1) of the Malaysian Constitution not only construct an inclusive identity narrative for the majority group, but also produce structural exclusion that becomes a source of social and political conflict.

In Fairclough's perspective (N. Fairclough & Scholz, 2020), this discourse practice can be understood as a dialectical process in which texts (constitutions) and socio-political practices mutually shape and reinforce each other. one another. Islam as an official religion is not only articulated through legal texts, but also managed and produced through institutions, public policies, and social practices that systematically reinforce its position. Therefore, an analysis of religion-based identity politics in Malaysia must consider how the discourse operates simultaneously at the symbolic and structural levels, which have far-reaching impacts on the dynamics of relations between religious and ethnic groups in society.

Institutions such as *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (JAKIM) play a strategic and central role in reproducing the discourse of Islamic identity as the core of Malaysian statehood. JAKIM is not just an administrative institution that regulates religious matters, but also an instrument of the state in consolidating and strengthening the narrative of Islam as the dominant identity through various policies and regulations that reach almost all aspects of social life (Hamdan, 2019). For example, in education, JAKIM oversees the implementation of a curriculum that makes Islamic education a mandatory part of public schools, especially for Malay students. This not only instills religious values early on, but also shapes the collective consciousness that being 'Malay' is synonymous with being 'Muslim'.

In addition, the regulation of halal food, which is strictly regulated by JAKIM, is one of the concrete manifestations of how religion is positioned as an economic and social identity. Halal

certification is not just a consumption issue, but a symbol of Islamic recognition that socially and politically emphasizes the identity boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims. In the realm of public moral policing, practices such as the arrest of non-muhrim couples by sharia police officers in various regions show how the state directly intervenes in the private lives of Muslim citizens, while marking the zones where Islamic values must be guarded and defended. These actions are not just administrative arrangements, but part of hegemonic discursive practices that systemically shape perceptions of norms and morality that must be adhered to by 'native' citizens of the state (Meuleman, 2011).

In the context of Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Islamic identity politics in Malaysia operates by legitimizing the dominance of the Muslim majority through the internalization of religious norms and values that serve as the foundation of the state. The state not only controls through formal power, but also produces social 'truths' that regulate who deserves to be part of the national community. As a result, the concept of citizen 'authenticity' is no longer solely based on citizenship or birthplace, but is also measured through interlocking criteria of religion and ethnicity - making non Muslim minority groups such as Chinese and Indians often seen as 'foreign' or secondary in the national narrative (Hefner, 2011).

Various field studies support this phenomenon. For example, research by Hamid (2012) shows that the policy of strengthening sharia and increasing the role of JAKIM strengthens the position of Islam in the public sphere while generating social tensions, especially among non-Muslim communities who feel their religious freedom and civil rights are increasingly restricted. In addition, a report by Human Rights Watch (2020) documented cases of legal discrimination against non-Muslims, particularly in relation to restrictions on religious rituals and the use of public spaces, making clear how religion-based state practices shape social hierarchies and exclusive collective identities.

Thus, identity politics in Malaysia does not only occur in the symbolic or rhetorical realm, but is manifested in institutional structures and hegemonic daily state practices. The state through JAKIM and related institutions actively constructs and maintains identity boundaries that separate the 'original' from the 'foreign', and maintains the status quo of Muslim majority rule in the context of public policy and social life.

Structural Discrimination against Non-Muslims: Religious Discourse and Policy Inequality

Based on official policy documents and reports from human rights organizations such as SUARAM and Freedom House, there is a systematic pattern of structural discrimination against non-Muslims in Malaysian public policy, both explicitly and through covert administrative practices. One of the clearest indications is the disparity in religious budget allocations, which are consistently far greater for Islamic institutions and programs than for those of other religions. State budget data shows that funds allocated to Islamic institutions, both at the federal level through Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) and at the state level, far exceed the fiscal support given to non-Muslim houses of worship or religious institutions such as Hindu temples, Christian churches and Buddhist temples (Hefner, 2015).

This funding imbalance not only shows the state's economic preference for official religion, but also reflects a political discourse that places Islam as a central pillar of national identity as well as an instrument of power legitimization. This is in line with Michel Foucault's argument about the relationship between power and knowledge, where control over financial resources is one mechanism for producing and affirming social 'truths' that benefit the majority group. In the Malaysian context, unequal funding reinforces the symbolic dominance of Islam, while inhibiting the economic and social development and sustainability of minority communities (Nagata et al., 1998).

SUARAM (Suara Rakyat Malaysia) and Freedom House reports have consistently highlighted

that these inequalities contribute to feelings of marginalization and injustice among non-Muslim minority groups. For example, restrictions on access to funds for the construction and repair of houses of worship make it difficult for these communities to sustain their religious and social activities (Fealy, 2004). In addition, these inequalities reinforce stereotypes and stigmatization of non-Muslim groups as 'second-class citizens', which in turn creates social and political tensions that potentially threaten national cohesion.

This phenomenon can also be analyzed through identity politics theory, which emphasizes how the state uses resources to assert dominant identities and marginalize other groups. Unequal budget allocations function not only as a form of economic discrimination, but also as a tool to limit the political and social representation of minorities within state structures (Hirschman & Wong, 1986). Thus, public fiscal policy in the religious context in Malaysia exhibits complex hegemonic dimensions, where Islam as the official state religion is centrally positioned in policy and resource governance, while non-Muslim groups face various systemic structural barriers.

According to Norman Fairclough (1995), ideological-discursive formation (IDF) is a mechanism by which dominant ideology is successfully inserted in discourse so as to form a "common sense" in society - something that is considered natural, natural, and cannot be questioned. Fairclough asserts that discourse not only reflects social reality, but also plays an active role in producing and reproducing power through texts, discursive practices, and social institutions. In the Malaysian context, policies packaged with the narratives of "maintaining harmony" and "respecting local values" can be understood as effective IDF practices, where the hegemonic Islam-Malay ideology is constructed as a necessity in the state system (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2001).

In addition, van Dijk (1998) in a critical discourse analysis study also shows how the dominant discourse uses a "legitimization" strategy to cover up discriminatory practices with social and cultural reasons that appear normative and positive. Field study by Kaur (2013) on religious policy in Malaysia confirms that the discourse of harmony is often used to limit demands for justice for minorities and uphold the dominance of Islam as part of an unshakable national identity. This narrative effectively eliminates space for political criticism and resistance, strengthening the position of the majority group through the naturalization of social and political inequality (Kwame Sundaram, 2018).

In this context, state discourse systemically obscures the real power behind the claims of harmony, making religion-based identity politics not only a means of formal legitimization, but also a covert tool of social control (Fairclough, 2003; Van Leeuwen, 2008). As such, critical discourse analysis offers an important conceptual tool to dissect how public policies in Malaysia reproduce domination and discrimination in ways that appear legitimate and natural.

Islamization of Public Policy: Education, Law, and Culture

One of the most conspicuous sectors in the practice of religion-based identity politics in Malaysia is the field of education. The national curriculum explicitly requires Islamic religious studies for Muslim students, while education in other religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, is given a much more limited or often secondary role (Mohamed & Hashim, 2016). This approach reinforces the position of Islam as the state religion as well as the foundation of national identity for the Malay Muslim majority. This curriculum policy not only reflects the ideological preferences of the state, but also serves as a social reproduction mechanism that shapes the way the younger generation perceives religion and national identity (Mohd Noor, 1999).

In addition, the learning materials in Malaysian National History textbooks have been criticized by academics and minority groups for their narratives that tend to overemphasize the contributions of Islamic civilization and the Malays, while the role of other ethnicities and religions in shaping the nation's history is minimized or ignored (Goh, 2014; Tan, 2018). This indirectly shapes an exclusive and homogeneous collective memory, which positions Malay-Muslims as the

'core' of the nation, and other groups as 'others' or marginal. This practice reinforces identity politics oriented towards one-group dominance through education, while inhibiting the development of inclusivity and respect for cultural and religious diversity among the younger generation (Hakim, 2017).

This critique of the national curriculum also points to the tension between the official state narrative and the reality of Malaysia's social plurality, where minority groups struggle to maintain their cultural identity and rights in an education system that tends to be asymmetrical. Within the framework of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, education becomes an important arena where ideological power is maintained through the formation of a collective consciousness that supports the status quo of domination ((Gramsci, 1995)). Therefore, education in Malaysia is not just about knowledge transfer, but also about the reproduction of identity politics and the legitimization of majority rule in a multicultural society.

Similarly, in Malaysia's dual legal system, the position of Islam is reinforced as a specialized legal system that governs Muslims through sharia courts, while civil law governs citizens in general. This model formally recognizes the existence of both legal systems in parallel, but in practice gives rise to various jurisdictional conflicts, especially in cases involving social relations across religion and ethnicity (Hooker & McAdams, 2003).

The most obvious example is in the case of interfaith marriage and divorce, where non-Muslim individuals married to Muslims are often caught in legal limbo. For example, in the event of divorce, child custody, or unilateral religious conversion proceedings by one of the parties, sharia courts often take over the authority, even without the consent or recognition of the civil courts. Such cases are widely reported by rights organizations and minority communities, who complain of systemic injustice and an imbalance of legal protection (Malek, 2017; SUARAM, 2020).

This policy shows how religious identity politics operates structurally in the Malaysian legal system, by making sharia law an instrument of strengthening Islamic hegemony while limiting the space for protecting the rights of non-Muslim minorities. From a critical theory perspective, this dual legal system is a manifestation of power practices that not only legally divide groups of people, but also assert rigid social and religious identity boundaries. This results in marginalization and legal inequality experienced by individuals who are at the intersection of two different legal systems and identities (Abdul Aziz Bari, 2012; Weiss, 2014).

Thus, the dual legal system in Malaysia is not just a technical legal issue, but also an arena of identity politics that strengthens the dominance of the majority group with serious consequences for the civil and social rights of minority citizens in the context of a multicultural society.

Resistance and Negotiation Space: Alternative Discourses from Civil Society

Although the Islamic-Malay identity discourse occupies a hegemonic position in Malaysian public policy, acceptance of this dominance does not go unchallenged. Civil society organizations (CSOs) such as Bersih, COMANGO (Coalition of Malaysian NGOs for International Human Rights Advocacy), and interfaith and ethnic groups have been active in developing counter-discourses that challenge this exclusive narrative. They emphasize the importance of pluralism, human rights, and distributive justice that transcend religious and ethnic boundaries (Case, 2017; Gomez, 2019).

These counter-discourses come in the form of policy advocacy, public awareness campaigns, and participation in national and international forums, which seek to open spaces for inclusive dialogue and challenge the status quo of majority domination (Amnesty International, 2020). For example, Bersih focuses on democratic reform and fair elections, while COMANGO actively criticizes human rights violations related to religious freedom and discrimination against minorities. Interfaith groups, such as Majlis Perundingan Antara Agama Malaysia (MAPIM), also take an important role in promoting interfaith dialog and social solidarity (Heng & Jomo, 2015).

Analytically, these counter-discourses can be understood as an attempt to destabilize the ideological discursive formation (Fairclough, 1995) that reinforces the dominance of Malay-Islamic identity. Through critiquing discriminatory practices, and offering alternative narratives that place pluralism as a central value, these groups attempt to redefine the public sphere and state policies in a more inclusive and egalitarian direction. Despite facing major challenges from hegemonic forces, the presence of these counter-discourses is a sign of the vitality of democracy and socio-political dynamics in Malaysia.

As a concrete example, the Bersih movement (*Gabungan Pilihan Raya Bersih dan Adil*) has consistently organized large demonstrations since 2007 to demand more transparent and fair electoral system reforms, which are considered an essential foundation for inclusive political representation without discrimination based on religious or ethnic identity (Welsh, 2012). Bersih's actions have succeeded in pressuring the government to make some small changes in electoral governance, although the struggle continues.

Meanwhile, COMANGO played a central role in encouraging Malaysia to report human rights violations to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC), including issues of religious freedom and minority protection. In 2011, COMANGO published a report highlighting various legal and policy discriminations targeting non-Muslims and ethnic minority groups, forcing the Malaysian government to provide several official statements and assurances of protection in international forums (Amnesty International, 2012).

In addition, Majlis Perundingan Antara Agama Malaysia (MAPIM) actively organizes interfaith dialogues and public awareness campaigns, such as the "National Interfaith Dialogue Day," aimed at building bridges of understanding and tolerance among diverse religious groups. The program has gained widespread support from certain communities and government agencies that are beginning to realize the importance of pluralism as the foundation of social harmony (Heng & Jomo, 2015). These policies and actions are tangible manifestations of counter-discourses that challenge the dominance of the Malay-Islamic identity and seek to expand public policy space in a more inclusive and equitable direction, while strengthening awareness of diversity as an important social asset in Malaysia's multicultural society.

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International, 2012). MAPIM also organizes interfaith dialogues and the "National Interfaith Dialogue Day" campaign to build understanding and tolerance (Heng & Jomo, 2015).

However, this resistance is often reframed by the state as "foreign", "liberal", or even "anti-national", a discursive strategy Fairclough calls recontextualization-the process of taking a counter-discourse and embedding it within the dominant meaning framework to undermine it. In this way, the state successfully maintains the hegemony of the Malay-Islamic narrative while discrediting alternative discourses that demand pluralism and justice (Fairclough, 1995).

CONCLUTION

This research reveals how Malay-Islamic identity politics plays a central role in the formation of public policy in Malaysia, institutionally cementing the position of Islam as the official religion and primary identity of the nation. Through state structures such as JAKIM and the dual judicial system, this hegemonic discourse is reproduced in various fields, from education to social regulation, resulting in discriminatory practices against non-Muslim minority groups. However, the dominance of this discourse does not go without a fight. Civil society organizations such as Bersih, COMANGO, and MAPIM actively develop counter-discourses that emphasize pluralism, human rights, and social justice, although they often face recontextualization efforts by the state to undermine this movement. This study shows that the dynamics of identity politics in Malaysia is a complex arena of discourse struggle, where power, religion and ethnicity interact with each other in the construction of public policies that have an impact on the socio-political life of a multicultural society.

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