Available online at
http://ejournal.uin-suska.ac.id/index.php/asiapacific/index
E-ISSN 2715-1816 | P-ISSN 2442-7896]

Asia Pacific Journal on Religion and Society
Volume. 8 Number 2 July-December 2024
Page. 98-109

THE STATE AND HIDDEN DISCRIMINATION:

Islamic Preference and the Future of Religious Harmony in Southeast Asia

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KEYWORD

Religious favoritism, Symbolic power, Structural violence, Interfaith relations

ABSTRACT

This study critically examines state-facilitated religious favoritism in Indonesia's plural democratic context, with a particular focus on the Masjid Paripurna program in Pekanbaru and comparative examples from majority non-Muslim regions. Drawing on structural violence (Galtung), symbolic power (Bourdieu), and theories of misrecognition (Honneth) and hegemony (Gramsci), the research reveals how ostensibly neutral administrative practices—budget allocations, permit procedures, and public moral narratives—systematically privilege majority religious groups. These practices manifest as symbolic violence, normalizing exclusion without overt coercion, and placing minority communities in a persistent dilemma of representation: conform to dominant norms or risk marginalization. Through document analysis, limited in-depth interviews, and thematic reading of policy discourse, the study argues that such favoritism undermines the secular ideals of equity and erodes trust in the state as a neutral arbiter. It calls for a paradigmatic shift toward institutional equity, ensuring that all faith communities enjoy equal access to material resources, symbolic recognition, and participatory governance in Indonesia's multi-religious society.

INTRODUCTION

Religious diversity remains a defining characteristic of Southeast Asia, a region inhabited by various ethnicities and adherents of major world religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and indigenous faiths. While much scholarly attention has been given to religious conflicts and dialogue between dominant faiths, such as Islam and Buddhism (Yusuf, 2017), less emphasis has been placed on the subtle mechanisms of state favoritism that privilege one religion over others—particularly Islam in Muslim-majority countries. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, the state often plays a dual role: as a secular administrative institution and as a patron of Islam. This duality has led to increasingly institutionalized forms of religious preference that, while not always overtly discriminatory, create systemic inequities for religious minorities (Alwi Almanduri, 2021).

The preferential treatment of Islam in several Southeast Asian Muslim-majority states is evident across multiple domains of governance, encompassing fiscal, legal, educational, and symbolic-cultural policies (Clarke & Halafoff, 2016). This form of religious favoritism manifests, for example, in disproportionate budget allocations for Islamic religious institutions, the compulsory inclusion of Islamic instruction in public education systems, and the active role of the state in sponsoring religious celebrations such as Maulid Nabi or Isra' Mi'raj—events that receive significant governmental endorsement and financial support (Landon & Briggs, 1951). Additionally, the symbolic domination of public space is reinforced through programs like the

construction of grand mosques or "Masjid Paripurna" (Model Mosque), which are funded by state budgets, managed by regional governments, and often positioned as hubs of religious, social, and even political activity (Hatta, 2021; Maharani et al., 2024; Mohd. Hatta, 2021).

In Indonesia, the "Masjid Paripurna" program, launched by several regional governments such as in Pekanbaru, exemplifies how public infrastructure is appropriated for the exclusive development of Islam, frequently without proportionate attention to other religious communities (Hafizhuddin et al., 2021). Although this initiative is often justified as part of cultural development or spiritual enrichment, it raises profound concerns about the neutrality of the secular state, equal access to public funding, and the systemic exclusion of religious minorities from civic recognition. These practices, though non-coercive in form, functionally establish a hierarchy of religiosity where Islam is privileged as the default religious identity, and other belief systems—whether Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, or indigenous religions—are rendered invisible or peripheral. This undermines not only Indonesia's constitutional commitment to religious equality, as enshrined in the 1945 Constitution and Pancasila, but also contravenes international human rights standards concerning freedom of religion, belief, and conscience (An-Na'īm, 2015). The institutionalization of this religious favoritism contributes to structural inequality by naturalizing the dominance of Islam in public discourse and policymaking, thereby fostering subtle forms of exclusion that are often normalized and rarely problematized within mainstream governance frameworks (Axt et al., 2018).

In contrast to overt religious persecution found in some Southeast Asian contexts—such as the protracted displacement and statelessness of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar or the ethno-religious insurgency in Southern Thailand—other, more insidious forms of religious inequality persist in ostensibly democratic states. These "soft" or structural forms of discrimination operate not through explicit violence or legal exclusion, but through bureaucratic preferences, symbolic recognition, and asymmetric cultural validation. Despite their less visible nature, these practices can exert profound influence on how religious identities are perceived, legitimized, and governed. Yet, such dynamics remain under-theorized in mainstream interreligious discourse, which continues to be dominated by paradigms of conflict resolution, surface-level tolerance, or nostalgic narratives of historical coexistence (Cassanova, 2008; Hefner, 2011).

This dominant discourse, while important in addressing overt tensions, often overlooks how state apparatuses—through education policy, budgetary practices, spatial planning, and civil registry systems—consolidate a form of religious hierarchy that privileges majority faiths, particularly Islam in Muslim-majority democracies like Indonesia and Malaysia (Dunkel & Dutton, 2016). As such, the assumption that religious harmony can be achieved solely through interfaith dialogue or communal outreach is increasingly inadequate. Without institutional equity and critical interrogation of the state's role in religious representation, such efforts risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to resolve. Drawing from Johan Galtung's concept of *structural violence* and Pierre Bourdieu's idea of *symbolic power*, it becomes clear that the state's preferential treatment of dominant religions often produces normalized exclusion—a kind of "banal favoritism" that does not provoke public outrage but quietly erodes pluralism from within. This analytical gap must be addressed to fully understand the contemporary landscape of religious inequality in Southeast Asia's plural societies (Hawkins & Nosek, 2012).

This article aims to analyze how state-sanctioned favoritism toward Islam in Southeast Asia contributes to subtle forms of religious discrimination, potentially undermining social cohesion and democratic pluralism. It examines case studies from Indonesia and Malaysia, highlighting how government policy, legal frameworks, and public funding mechanisms construct a hierarchy of religious legitimacy. This study argues that religious favoritism, even in its moderate forms, constitutes a challenge to the ideals of multicultural citizenship and religious equality in the region.

By shifting the analytical lens from overt interreligious conflict to the quiet politics of privilege, this article contributes a critical perspective to existing literature on religion and state in Southeast Asia. It advocates for a rethinking of how plural societies negotiate majority religion and minority rights within the framework of democratic governance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In examining the practice of state religious favoritism in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, it is crucial to move beyond descriptive approaches and engage in a structural mapping of the systemic inequalities that underpin such favoritism. One relevant framework is the concept of structural violence, as introduced by Johan Galtung (2018). Structural violence refers to forms of harm that are not perpetrated directly by individual agents, but are embedded within social and political systems that systematically disadvantage certain groups. Within the context of interreligious relations, this form of violence often manifests in the form of public policies that appear neutral on the surface but subtly favor the dominant religious group—for instance, budget allocations that benefit only certain religious institutions, or regulations that normalize a particular expression of religion as the public default (Parekh, 2007).

This framework is reinforced by Pierre Bourdieu's (2018a) theory of symbolic power, which elucidates how power operates through symbols, language, and cultural structures that are perceived as natural. In this regard, the state—as the dominant agent—possesses the authority to define which religious representations are legitimate and "official," and to institutionalize specific religious norms in the public sphere. When the state predominantly affirms Islamic symbols in public life—such as through the construction of grand state-sponsored mosques, the implementation of religiously themed school uniforms, or the enforcement of exclusive religious curricula—what occurs is the naturalization of Islam as the cultural norm of the state. As a result, minority religions are rendered subordinate—not through physical repression, but through symbolic and structural marginalization that deprives them of equal visibility and public recognition.

In addition, within the context of religious democracies such as Indonesia, this phenomenon can also be analyzed through the lens of soft discrimination—a subtle form of exclusion that does not take the form of outright bans or open repression, but rather operates through unequal access, differential recognition, and institutional bias. Soft discrimination may not appear in the language of overt religious conflict, yet it is reproduced through sectoral policies, educational regulations, and budgetary structures that consistently privilege the religious majority. Precisely because of its bureaucratic and procedural nature, soft discrimination often escapes public scrutiny, cloaked as "normal" governance practices.

This analysis can be further deepened by engaging with the critical secularism perspective, which critiques how modern states—despite claims to secularism or religious neutrality—often exhibit implicit preference toward a particular religion (Asad, 2003). In many Muslim-majority countries, secularism is not manifested through a strict separation of religion and state, but rather through a form of religious governance, in which the state actively manages religious life in ways that structurally favor the majority religion. This concept is essential in exposing the paradox of democratic regimes that enforce religious identity politics while simultaneously claiming to uphold equal rights and protections for all citizens.

Drawing from this theoretical framework, the article approaches state favoritism toward Islam not merely as a sectoral concern, but as a systemic problem embedded in symbolic power structures, public policy regimes, and the social normalization of religious hierarchies. Within this perspective, state practices such as the *Masjid Paripurna* (Grand Mosque Program), monolithic religious education, and the dominance of Islamic symbols in urban spatial planning can be read as institutionalized forms of cultural hegemony. These practices demand not only interreligious

dialogue, but a fundamental rethinking of social justice and pluralism in diverse societies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach within a critical analytical framework (Salim, 2012). Rather than aiming to quantitatively measure the intensity of discrimination, the primary goal of this approach is to critically investigate the structures and mechanisms of state-led religious favoritism in the context of Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia. The research focuses on how public policies—seemingly neutral and administrative—operate both symbolically and structurally to reinforce the dominance of the majority religion, and how such dominance affects the existence and religious freedom of minority groups.

The research strategy employs a case study method, focusing on the *Masjid Paripurna* (Grand Mosque) Program in the city of Pekanbaru, Riau. This program was selected as a concrete example of how the state is directly involved in financing, managing, and reinforcing Islamic symbols in public space using public funds (Herdiansyah, 2018). Furthermore, the program demonstrates how religion is instrumentalized for development and social control purposes, while also offering a site to observe how non-Muslim communities respond to such biased policies.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques. First, document analysis, which included local regulations, regional government budget plans (APBD), religious activity reports, and local and national media coverage of the Masjid Paripurna program. These documents serve as the primary sources for tracing the underlying logic and official narratives that inform local government policies. Second, a literature review was conducted, drawing upon previous studies on religion–state relations, structural discrimination, and religious policy in Indonesia and the broader Southeast Asian region. Third, a series of limited in-depth interviews were carried out with key informants, including non-Muslim religious leaders, freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) activists, and local scholars concerned with these issues. These interviews were intended to complement the document analysis and to provide insights from those most directly affected by the policy.

Data analysis was conducted thematically, focusing on the identification of narrative patterns, linguistic structures, and symbolic practices embedded in the policy. In addition, all data were examined through a critical theoretical lens, employing concepts such as symbolic power ((Bourdieu, 1989)), structural violence (Galtung, 2018), and critical secularism to understand how power operates through symbolic forms often concealed within bureaucratic and administrative procedures of the state.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Budget Politics and the Production of Symbolic Inequality: A Study of the Masjid Paripurna Program

One of the most tangible forms of state religious favoritism lies in the exclusive allocation of public funds for the strengthening of Islamic religious infrastructure. The *Masjid Paripurna* (Grand Mosque) Program, implemented by the municipal government of Pekanbaru, serves as a concrete example of how budget politics are deployed to reinforce the symbolic dominance of Islam in public spaces. According to the 2023 Pekanbaru Regional Budget (APBD), the allocated funding for this program reached IDR 17.5 billion (approx. USD 1.2 million), encompassing mosque construction, remuneration for imams and preachers, Qur'anic memorization programs (*tahfizhul Qur'an*), and mosque-based da'wah activities (Andreas, 2019; AZHARI, 2021). There was no equivalent allocation for houses of worship belonging to other religions.

This program is officially justified as a means of "empowering the ummah" and "strengthening public morality"—two phrases frequently used to wrap identity politics within the discourse of development. In practice, however, mosques designated as *Masjid Paripurna* are often selected through top-down processes, with their administrators appointed not by local congregations, but based on political proximity to the government. This has generated silent resistance not only from non-Muslim communities, who lack comparable access to public funds, but even from segments of the Muslim population who feel excluded from these state-led religious initiatives.

This practice clearly affirms Pierre Bourdieu's classic argument that the modern state does not operate solely through coercive power (*violence physique*), but more subtly—and often more effectively—through symbolic power: the capacity to define what counts as legitimate meaning, norms, and boundaries within society (Bourdieu, 2018b). In the context of religious policy, symbolic power functions when the state determines which forms of religious expression are "official," "proper," and "worthy" of public display—while marginalizing other forms as "inappropriate," "minor," or "disruptive to harmony."

The *Masjid Paripurna* program thus illustrates how symbolic power is exercised materially, cloaked in symbolic legitimacy. On the surface, the construction of mosques with public funds is framed as "empowerment of the Muslim community" or "enhancement of spiritual quality." Yet this policy is never articulated within a logic of equitable budget distribution based on religious diversity. When mosques are lavishly developed—complete with structured da'wah programs and the strengthening of Islamic human resources—while no similar funding is offered to churches, temples, or other local houses of worship, the state engages in an uneven distribution of symbolic honor. This is where Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence becomes relevant: a form of violence that is not physical, but far more insidious, as it penetrates the collective consciousness and is accepted as "social truth" (Allan, 2022; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

This symbolic violence has a double effect. First, it produces an asymmetrical legitimacy structure, in which only the symbols and practices of the majority religion are deemed worthy of representation in the state's public imagery. Second, it normalizes exclusion of minority religious groups—not through outright prohibition, but through the systematic absence of space, funding, and institutional recognition. In such cases, symbolic violence requires no visible repressive agent; a functioning bureaucracy "doing business as usual" is sufficient for exclusion to persist indefinitely (Ningtyas, 2015).

This phenomenon is particularly dangerous because it blurs the line between religion as personal expression and religion as a project of power. When a particular religious expression is repeatedly facilitated, promoted, and reproduced through state platforms, society begins to internalize it as the only "normal" form of religiosity, while alternative expressions are seen as deviant, minor, or even a "threat to harmony." In Bourdieu's terms, this is the work of institutional habitus—the state's unconscious reproduction of symbolic power through everyday practices such as budgeting, curriculum design, and ceremonial protocols (Cronin, 1996; Edelman, 1992).

In the context of a plural democratic state like Indonesia, this one-sided religious symbolization is not merely a form of bias—it becomes a mechanism of systemic cultural delegitimation (Hefner, 2009; Humfress, 2024). When taxes are collected from all citizens regardless of religion, but disproportionately used to promote only one religious tradition, the state not only fails to uphold justice, but also reinforces the symbolic superiority of the majority religion over minorities. In the long term, this risks deepening symbolic polarization, in which citizens feel either "visible" or "invisible" in the face of the state depending on their religious identity (Griffiths, 1986).

Therefore, non-inclusive religious policy is not merely an issue of budgetary distribution, but of meaning production and recognition. A state that over-identifies with a single religion—even if

it is the majority—without creating equal symbolic and material space for others, is effectively institutionalizing inequality in its most subtle—and most socially corrosive—form.

Eroding State Neutrality: *The Latent Practice of Structural Discrimination Against Religious Minorities*

Although Indonesia's constitution guarantees freedom of religion and officially recognizes six religions, empirical realities reveal that the state often fails to function as a neutral and fair facilitator for all religious groups. In practice, the governance of religious life is heavily influenced by the demographic composition of the majority population in a given area, which in turn shapes local policy—particularly with respect to permits, budget allocations, and symbolic recognition for houses of worship.

In the city of Pekanbaru, for instance, the *Masjid Paripurna* (Grand Mosque) program—funded entirely by public resources—demonstrates how state power is used to prioritize and consolidate Islam as the majority religion (Azkiah, 2022). There are no comparable programs for other religious groups, including for churches or temples with long-standing historical presence in the area. According to a 2022 report by the Riau Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB), several non-Muslim places of worship experienced administrative obstacles in obtaining permits or renovations, while *Masjid Paripurna* initiatives received full support from the local government, including assistance with permits, security, and Islamic education and preaching programs.

Importantly, this pattern is not unique to Muslim-majority areas. In regions where Christians constitute the majority—such as Minahasa in North Sulawesi—Muslim communities have reported difficulties in obtaining permits for building mosques and prayer facilities. A prominent case involved the construction of Al-Hikmah Mosque in Tumaluntung village, Kauditan subdistrict, which was rejected by segments of the local community despite meeting administrative requirements. Justifications cited included fears of "Islamic expansion," revealing how majoritarian sentiments can also produce exclusivist behavior toward religious minorities (Gerung, 2022; Syuhudi, 2017).

A similar case occurred in Sikka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, where the population is predominantly Roman Catholic. A 2021 report by Indonesia's National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) noted that Muslim communities faced delays and rejection in the bureaucratic process of constructing prayer halls (musholla), often under the pretext of preserving "local harmony." In many such cases, the vague notion of "environmental conduciveness" (*kondusivitas lingkungan*) is invoked to justify the exclusion of religious minorities, despite lacking any solid legal foundation (Junaedi, 2016).

These examples indicate that state-facilitated religious favoritism and structural discrimination are not exclusive to Muslim-majority regions, but rather represent a generalized and recurring pattern in religious governance across Indonesia (Karimulloh & Putra, 2019). This pattern is localistic in nature: the demographically dominant group in any given area—often aligned with local political power—tends to shape the policy direction regarding religious spaces, funding, and public representation. What emerges is not merely horizontal tension among communities, but a vertical production of inequality embedded in the bureaucratic operations of the state (Siméone, 2007).

Viewed through the lens of Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence, such practices represent a form of harm not enacted directly by individuals or institutions, but rather embedded in unjust social and political structures. Structural violence occurs when state institutions—be they local governments, educational bodies, or security forces—systematically fail to treat all citizens equally, particularly regarding access to places of worship, religious funding, and cultural representation . These injustices may not be immediately visible, but their consequences are deeply felt: religious minorities are procedurally and psychologically excluded from the sociopolitical spaces they inhabit.

This pattern is observable across various regions. In Minahasa, rejection of mosque construction is often justified on grounds such as "public disturbance" or "lack of communal support." In Bali, the Hindu majority enjoys greater freedom in regulating religious and customary space, while the construction of churches or mosques often faces complex administrative barriers. Meanwhile, in Muslim-majority regions like Aceh and West Sumatra, *sharia*-inspired regional regulations have become both symbolic and legal instruments for regulating public life in accordance with dominant religious norms, despite the presence of non-Muslim populations (Firdaus et al., 2023).

These dynamics illustrate not only a violation of the principle of equality before the law, but also the normalization of unequal treatment. In Bourdieu's terms, this reflects the operation of symbolic power—the capacity to define what is legitimate, proper, and dominant in the public sphere. The state often functions as an agent of symbolic domination, actively or passively producing structures of meaning that privilege the majority religion through policies, official narratives, and visual symbols such as architecture, dress codes, and liturgical language in public forums (Bredo & Feinberg, 1979). When narratives such as "local wisdom" or "community aspirations" are employed to justify the rejection of minority places of worship, the state effectively endorses symbolic exclusion in the name of majoritarian consensus.

By integrating the insights of Galtung and Bourdieu, this study argues that religious discrimination in Indonesia is not merely a matter of individual prejudice or isolated incidents, but is rooted in the deep configurations of power operating through structural mechanisms and symbolic forms. Violence in this context does not need to be physical or explicit; it can persist through bureaucratic delays, ambiguous regulations, or discriminatory administrative decisions. When access to worship spaces, public funds, and recognition is contingent upon demographic positioning and local power relations, substantive justice remains elusive, even when constitutional guarantees exist on paper (Allan, 2022; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Buchanan et al., 1993).

This situation demands a deconstruction of the myth of state neutrality, as well as a critical reassessment of Indonesia's decentralization model, which often opens space for the politicization of religion at the local level. In a pluralistic society like Indonesia, the challenge is not merely to "maintain harmony," but to reconstruct systems that enable all religious identities to be equally present—both materially and symbolically—in the eyes of the state (Bourdieu, 1993).

Thus, instead of ensuring universal religious freedom, the state increasingly functions as a facilitator of majority dominance, utilizing administrative tools and local regulations to entrench asymmetrical power relations—both actively and through systemic neglect. This creates an uneven religious landscape prone to symbolic and social friction, and reinforces the view that religious conflict in Indonesia is not merely intergroup tension, but a form of structural conflict produced by unequal access to the state and its resources.

The "Religious Society" Narrative and the Obfuscation of Discrimination in the Language of Public Morality

One of the most common ideological strategies used to justify state-led religious favoritism is its framing through narratives of public morality. In the city of Pekanbaru, for example, the *Masjid Paripurna* (Grand Mosque) program is framed as a strategic effort to build a "religious and morally upright civil society." At first glance, such language appears inclusive and universal (Asmita et al., 2022; Saputra & Astuti, 2021; Tutrisno, 2021). However, a closer examination reveals that the term "religious" in this discourse is implicitly equated almost exclusively with Islam, particularly through formalized expressions such as congregational worship, Qur'anic memorization programs, da'wah activities, and moral enforcement based on Islamic norms.

There is no explicit recognition of plural systems of values or spiritual expressions originating from other religious traditions. The concept of "noble character" (*akhlak mulia*) is reduced to a

state-defined Islamic morality and is never articulated in terms of alternative ethical frameworks—such as Christian compassion, Buddhist *karuṇā* (compassion), or harmony in indigenous belief systems. As a result, the religious narrative promoted by the state becomes singular, hierarchical, and hegemonic .

In this context, moral discourse does not merely function as public communication; it serves as a tool of symbolic legitimation that masks underlying power relations and structural exclusion. Such narratives create the illusion of social consensus, whereby the symbolic dominance of Islam in public space is perceived as the "will of the majority," while in fact it results from structured and non-neutral policy interventions. This is precisely where Talal Asad's (Asad, 2003) critique becomes relevant: in *Formations of the Secular*, Asad argues that modern secularism is far from neutral—it selectively arranges religion, determining which forms are considered rational, legitimate, and "contributive to social progress." The languages of morality, law, and development are mobilized to classify certain religions as more compatible with the state's project, while others are deemed problematic or deviant (Turner & Asad, 1994).

Furthermore, this practice aligns with Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, in which ideological dominance is established not through repression but via symbolic consensus and the normalization of certain values as universal (Gramsci, 2000, 2013). In the case of the *Masjid Paripurna*, both the state and local elites construct normative Islam as the only form of religiosity worthy of funding, display, and state facilitation. This hegemony functions not through coercion but through the silent production of social consent, gradually pushing alternative religious expressions out of public visibility.

Viewed from Judith Butler's theory of performativity (Butler, 2021), religious discourse such as "religious civil society" can be understood as a performative act—a repeated invocation of specific norms that eventually appear natural. When the state consistently produces discourse on religiosity through the lens of formal Islam and materializes it via mosques, uniforms, sermons, and public rituals, it is constructing the ideal religious citizen in alignment with the dominant narrative. This narrows the space for more silent, non-dogmatic, or community-based religious expressions that do not fit the state's religious schema (Boucher, 2006; Salih, 2007).

Thus, the public morality narrative promoted through the *Masjid Paripurna* program is far from neutral. It is the product of symbolic and ideological power exercised through the state's language and institutions to structure how society understands "religion," "publicness," and "the common good." The danger of such narratives lies in their ability to conceal systemic exclusion, all while creating the illusion that all citizens are equally accommodated. In reality, only the majority group receives affirmation and legitimacy, while others are quietly pushed to the margins—without repression, without open debate, but with real and lasting effects (Nagata et al., 1998).

As a result of this symbolic exclusion and policy imbalance, minority groups experience not only structural marginalization—in terms of limited access to places of worship, public funding, and participation in official religious forums—but also a multilayered dilemma of representation. Within a hegemonic narrative of religiosity based on majority expressions, minorities face a difficult choice: to symbolically conform to dominant religious identity in order to appear "compatible" with public morality, or to retain their authentic religious identity at the risk of being seen as deviant, less religious, or even as "a threat to social harmony."

This dilemma reflects what Axel Honneth (2003) calls misrecognition—a condition in which individuals or communities are not only denied fair recognition by social structures but are coerced into reshaping their identities in accordance with the norms of recognition set by the dominant group. When the state only affirms particular forms of religious expression—such as formal Islamic piety—other traditions must symbolically adapt, using majority idioms, incorporating "neutral" elements in their rites, or concealing certain practices to avoid "burdening the public sphere."

In James C. Scott's (2009) terms, this practice constitutes a "public transcript"—an outward performance by subordinate groups intended to avoid sociopolitical backlash (Bailey & Scott, 1987). In such situations, minorities are not truly free to express their beliefs autonomously; rather, they must redesign their religious "appearance" to fit into a public space constructed by and for majority norms. Consequently, religious expression becomes performative, not out of spiritual freedom, but as a survival strategy within an unequal system (Burge et al., 2014).

Over time, this produces a serious erosion of public trust in the state as a neutral and protective institution. When the state is consistently seen to favor one group—through symbols, budgets, or discourse—minorities are likely to seek protection and solidarity within their own communal identities. This risks deepening religious segmentation and may encourage the emergence of minority exclusivism in response to the institutionalized majoritarian exclusivism.

In this context, religious identity sentiment transforms from being merely a spiritual expression into a mechanism of resistance and sociopolitical protection. When the state fails to guarantee equal rights for all citizens, religious affiliation becomes the most concrete resource through which communities seek recognition, safety, and affirmation. Ironically, this is precisely what undermines inclusive nation-building and reinforces social polarization.

Therefore, the dilemma of representation is not merely about identity politics, but serves as a critical indicator of the state's failure to manage pluralism justly. When dominant symbols are continuously reproduced without adequate space for diverse expressions, public trust in the state is not built on equality, but on conditional and fragile tolerance.

CONCLUSION

In Indonesia's decentralized political landscape, local governments wield significant discretion over religious affairs, often translating demographic dominance into preferential policies. This study's findings demonstrate that: 1). Institutionalized Symbolic Violence: Programs like Masjid Paripurna, framed as moral and developmental initiatives, operate through symbolic power to legitimize and naturalize the predominance of Islam in public space. Minority religions become invisible not through explicit bans, but via the absence of institutional support; 2). Structural Discrimination Beyond Muslim-Majority Areas: Comparative cases from Minahasa and Sikka reveal that favoritism functions as a systemic pattern—wherever majority groups hold sway, administrative mechanisms (permits, funding, symbolic representation) reinforce their dominance, regardless of religious affiliation; and Dilemma of Representation and Eroded Trust: Minority communities navigate a double bind—either adapting their practices to dominant norms (public transcript) or risking misrecognition and marginalization. This dynamic corrodes confidence in the state's neutrality, prompting minorities to seek solidarity within more insular identity networks.

To address these challenges, this article recommends: 1). Equitable Budgeting Frameworks: Establish transparent guidelines that mandate proportional allocation of public funds for all officially recognized religions, with oversight mechanisms to prevent skewed spending; 2). Standardized Permitting Procedures: Develop uniform, time-bound regulations for the construction, renovation, and operation of all houses of worship, eliminating ad hoc or discretionary barriers; 3). Inclusive Moral Narratives: Craft public communications and policy justifications that explicitly recognize the diversity of Indonesia's religious traditions, moving beyond single-faith moral rhetoric; 4). Capacity-Building for Local Officials: Provide training on critical secularism and human rights standards (e.g., ICCPR Article 18) to regional bureaucrats, emphasizing the state's role in safeguarding religious equality; and 5). Participatory Policy Forums: Institutionalize multi-religious councils at provincial and district levels, ensuring that minority representatives have a genuine voice in religious policy planning and evaluation.

By reorienting policy and discourse toward substantive equality, Indonesia can strengthen its foundational principles of Pancasila and uphold its constitutional guarantee of religious freedom—transforming diversity from a site of contestation into a source of collective resilience and national solidarity.

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