

RELIGION, NATIONALISM, AND CITIZENSHIP: Religion Majoritarian Approach (RMA) in Southeast Asia

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Abstract:

The majority religion in Southeast Asian countries transcends the realm of personal belief and holds significance beyond individual privacy. Hence, the objective of this study is to examine the influence of the predominant religion in each Southeast Asian country on the development of distinct patterns of religion, nationalism, and citizenship. This article uses a qualitative research method based on literature study. The approach used is RMA (Religion Majoritarian Approach). This study demonstrates the presence of three distinct typologies of state relations and majority religion in Southeast Asian nations. The initial categorization of the majority religion served as the foundation for civil identity and nationalism in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand. The second typology refers to the imposition of limitations on the majority religion and its alignment with the objectives of the state, as exemplified by the cases of Laos, Vietnam, and Singapore. The third typology, dominant faiths assume the role of an informal institution that also governs the state, as exemplified by the Philippines and Timor Leste, where the Roman Catholic Church holds significant influence.

Agama mayoritas di negara-negara Asia Tenggara melampaui ranah kepercayaan pribadi dan memiliki signifikansi yang melampaui privasi individu. Oleh karena itu, tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengkaji pengaruh agama mayoritas di setiap negara Asia Tenggara terhadap perkembangan pola-pola agama, nasionalisme, dan kewarganegaraan yang berbeda. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif berdasarkan kajian pustaka. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah RMA (Pendekatan Agama Mayoritas). Penelitian ini menunjukkan adanya tiga

tipologi yang berbeda dalam hubungan negara dan agama mayoritas di negara-negara Asia Tenggara. Kategorisasi awal dari agama mayoritas berfungsi sebagai fondasi bagi identitas sipil dan nasionalisme di negara-negara seperti Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar, Kamboja, dan Thailand. Tipologi kedua mengacu pada pengenaan batasan terhadap agama mayoritas dan penyesuaannya dengan tujuan negara, seperti yang dicontohkan oleh kasus Laos, Vietnam, dan Singapura. Tipologi ketiga, agama dominan mengasumsikan peran lembaga informal yang juga mengatur negara, seperti yang dicontohkan oleh Filipina dan Timor Leste, di mana Gereja Katolik Roma memiliki pengaruh yang signifikan.

Keywords: *citizenship; nationalism; religion majoritarian approach (RMA)*

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Introduction

The notion of the Religion Majoritarian Approach (RMA) is used to examine the influence of the predominant religion within a state. This framework provides a comprehensive theory that highlights the influential role of religion in molding public policy and state institutions, serving as a significant factor in the formulation of laws (Pirosa 2021, 278). Additionally, religion assumes a significant role in formal state occasions, often represented through religious symbols that embody a country's cultural and national identity. Beyond personal matters, during its zenith, the majority religion plays a crucial role in shaping social interactions and cultural expressions (Perez 2020, 2).

The unique cultures of Southeast Asian countries are closely tied to the influence of Eastern traditions and the predominant religions in the region. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, Islam exerts a significant religious influence. Countries like Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia are profoundly shaped by Buddhism. The Philippines and Timor Leste reflect the pervasive influence of Catholicism. Each nation in the region possesses a predominant religion that plays a critical role in shaping societal and governmental functions. Singapore stands as an exception, where the religious landscape is more pluralistic, and no single religion holds a dominant influence (Perez 2020, 2).

Extensive research has explored the correlation between religion and state in Southeast Asia. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of previous studies on the influence of the predominant religions on society,

specifically focusing on Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, and Buddhism. For instance, Robert W. Hefner's academic paper, "*Religious Resurgence in Contemporary Asia: Southeast Asian Perspectives on Capitalism, the State, and the New Piety*", examines the resurgence of religion in Southeast Asia in the context of contemporary Asia (Hefner 2010, 1031). The work highlights the remarkable surge in religious observance and affiliation in the region. He identifies key factors contributing to religious revival, such as secularism, postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and changes in governmental and economic frameworks. The study presents concrete illustrations of the religious revival movements across several Southeast Asian nations, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia. It emphasizes the diversity of these movements, ranging from lay religious organizations to charismatic Catholic groups and Islamic revivalism. Hefner concludes that this resurgence stems from both existential unease and opportunities for active involvement in a swiftly evolving global society, economy, and politics. It highlights the prominent role of moral and spiritual practices in navigating these transformations.

R. Michael Feener, in his work titled "*Islam in Southeast Asia to c. 1800*", discusses the historical significance of Islam in Southeast Asia up to the 19th century. Feener argues that the Islamization in Southeast Asia was assisted by increasing activity along maritime trade routes connecting the region to the burgeoning Muslim world. This spread was not centrally orchestrated, but rather a consequence of interrelated commercial and cultural exchanges, leading to diverse and vibrant manifestations of Islamic culture. A new phase of Islamization emerged in the late 13th and 14th centuries, marked by significant transformations in society and governance. Furthermore, the research highlights the pivotal roles of Sufism, commercial networks, and Muslim communities in shaping Islamic identity in the Southeast Asian. It also examines the growth of Melaka in the 15th century, the effects of Portuguese conquest, and the emergence of Aceh as a prominent Islamic hub in the 17th century. Furthermore, Feener explores the flourishing of Islamic literature in various languages during the 17th and 18th centuries, an era known as the Muslim vernacular age. His study emphasizes the importance of understanding complex historical processes through interdisciplinary approaches to investigate the history of Islam in Southeast Asia (Feener 2019, 1).

Similarly, Houben's research elucidates the distinctive features of Islam in Southeast Asia. His work delves into the contemporary political landscape of Islam, emphasizing particularly on the Muslim majorities and minorities in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Southern Thailand, and the

Southern Philippines. Houben explores the historical and political factors that have shaped the relationship between state policy and Islam while addressing the challenges faced by Muslim minority communities in the region. The study also examines Islamic revivalism, often referred to as "Islamization," as a grassroots movement to promote religious devotion and affiliation among Southeast Asia Muslims. Houben's research analyzes how global and local dynamics influence statehood and ethnicity, particularly regarding the increasing prominence of Islam. It explores the intersection of Islam and national identity in multiethnic states like Malaysia and the Philippines (Houben 2003, 149).

Bernardo E. Brown and Claire Thi Liên Tran address the influence of Catholicism in Southeast Asia in their article titled *"Introduction: Global Catholicism in Southeast Asia: Mobilities and Networks"*. Brown examines the functioning of Catholic networks in the region, highlighting the significance of entities such as the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) in shaping religious politics in the 21st century. The study highlights the growing influence of Southeast Asian Catholic leaders within the Church hierarchy and their impact on global Catholicism (Brown & Tran 2020, 197). Buddhism plays a vital role in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. China has strategically employed Buddhism as a political instrument to extend its influence in Southeast Asia, integrating it into their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) program launched in 2013 (Raymond 2020, 346).

Building on previous studies that elucidate key theories regarding the influence of religion on various aspects of Southeast Asia countries, this research proposes that the concept of a predominant religion in these nations extends far beyond personal affair. The novelty of this study lies in its examination of how the predominant religion in each Southeast Asian country influences the formation of distinctive religious, nationalistic, and demographic characteristics in the modern era. Utilizing a socio-historical methodology, this research employs the Religion Majoritarian Approach (RMA) framework to analyze the role of predominant religions in shaping national identity and societal structures.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on an extensive literature review. Primary sources include scholarly works such as books, academic journal articles, reports, and news publications, all of which explore the role of majority religions in shaping nationalism and citizenship in Southeast Asia. Through a comparative analysis framework, the study investigates the influence of majority religions on social policies, public

rituals, and religious identity, while considering for historical and socio-political variations across the region.

The Religion Majoritarian Approach (RMA) provides the analytical foundation for this study, focusing on how the influence of predominant religions affects the rights and social standing of minority groups (Perez 2020). The study utilizes thematic analysis to examine national holidays, religious identities, and citizenship policies, categorizing data based on historical contexts, religious-political influence, and socio-cultural dynamics.

The article examines cases from Southeast Asian countries categorized by their majority religions: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei as predominantly Muslim nations; Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, and Vietnam as predominantly Buddhist countries; and the Philippines and Timor-Leste as predominantly Catholic nations. This categorization provides a comprehensive overview of the religious landscape in the region and facilitates nuanced comparisons. The study acknowledges limitations inherent in a literature-based approach, including the potential for bias in secondary sources. To mitigate these challenges, a wide range of sources was selected, and cross-referencing was employed wherever possible. Despite these limitations, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how predominant religions shape the socio-political and cultural landscapes of Southeast Asia.

Results and Discussion

Islam's Role in Southeast Asia: Religion, Nationalism, and Citizenship

Southeast Asia, a region characterized by its religious diversity, has long been shaped by the interplay of dominant religious traditions and state governance. Among these, Islam holds a prominent place in shaping the sociopolitical landscape of countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. This section explores how Islam, as the majority religion, influences national identity, citizenship laws, and public policy.

Indonesia

The impact of Islam in Indonesia is deeply rooted in its historical trajectory. Before the nation's formation, the region was predominantly home to Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms. The introduction of Islam to Indonesia remains a subject of scholarly debate, with differing viewpoints regarding its exact timing. Nonetheless, Islam has undeniably exerted a pervasive and significant influence on Indonesian governance since the country gained independence in 1945. The establishment of Islamic institutions associated with the state in 1950 symbolized the integration of Islam with Indonesian

nationalism, reflecting its deep connection to the popular identity (Houben 2003,150). This integration stems from the historical role of Islamic groups, which, alongside other movements, embodied the spirit of anti-colonial resistance (Liow 2022, 24).

The influence of Islam was further institutionalized with the creation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs as compensation for the dissolution of the Jakarta Charter on August 18, 1945. The Jakarta Charter, which included the controversial "seven words" referencing Islamic principles, was annulled to prevent potential religious conflicts. However, the spirit of the charter was later revived in the late 1950s and continues to be accommodated in various forms today, albeit amidst ongoing debates (Elson 2013, 380). In 2019, a compromise between the Islamic majority and the secular state resulted in the establishment of a religious moderation platform under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This policy underscores the importance of protecting minority religions and preserving religious pluralism (Cholil 2022, 198). Although proposed by the Islamic majority, the Ministry of Religious Affairs operates beyond Islamic concerns, as outlined in Government Regulation Number 33 of 1949. Article 1(b) of the regulation emphasizes the ministry's role in ensuring every citizen's right to practice and worship according to their beliefs.

Despite its inclusive mandate, the influence of Islamic values on Indonesian law and public policy is evident. For instance, the Marriage Law No. 1 of 1974, the Sharia Banking Law (Law No. 1 of 2008), the Law No. 23 of 2011 on Zakat, and the Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which mandates religious education, reflect the integration of Islamic principles into the legal and social frameworks of the country. These laws illustrate how the majority religion shapes citizens' rights, obligations, and social norms.

Islam's grassroots movements have also played a crucial role in shaping the nation. The proliferation of Islamic institutions and organizations at the community level has gradually influenced the upper echelons of the state. This phenomenon is exemplified by events such as the Jakarta Governor election, where religious organizations demonstrated their significant mobilizing power (Rasyid et al. 2020, 2). The dialogue between religion and the state in Indonesia has been conducted democratically, allowing the nation to adapt to the challenges posed by transnational politics (Prihantoro 2019,384). Legal frameworks accommodating the majority religion often emerge from negotiations between Islamic groups and state authorities. This collaborative approach highlights Indonesia's resilience in maintaining a balance between religious influence and secular state principles.

Malaysia

The process of Islamization in Malaysia can be categorized into four stages: gradualist, populist, reformist, and triumphalist. The gradualist era which spanned the 11th to 13th centuries, was marked by the influence of Muslim and Sufi commerce. During the populist era, from the 14th to 18th centuries, a significant number of Malays adopted Islam. The reformist era, spanning from the 19th century to the mid-20th century, introduced Islamic reforms in response to modernization and colonial influence. The most recent period, characterized as the triumphalist era, began in the mid-20th century to the 21st century. The prominence of Islam intensified after 1981, with the tenure of Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad, during which Islamic organizations adopted a unified perspective on the concept of Islamic triumph (Aljunied 2019, 186).

The proliferation of Islamic *da'wah* groups in Malaysia has profoundly shaped the country's Islamic framework. These organizations have also served as key hubs for international Islamic movements, such as *Jama'at Tabligh*. Simultaneously, the Malaysian government has actively promoted the integration of Islamic principles across various sectors, positioning Malaysia as a nation that embraces Islamic values. The influence of the majority religion is evident both at the grassroots level and through top-down governance mechanisms. Notably, Islamic terminology is consistently invoked during transitions of political power, reinforcing its integration into national governance. The strong connection between Islam and the Malaysian state has resulted in the implementation of highly Islamic policies. For instance, the government has incorporated Islamic principles into public administration through initiatives such as '*Islam Hadhari*' (Rahman & Hamid 2024, 284).

Malaysia also applies Sharia law more extensively than Indonesia. For example, Malaysian marriage laws, which include penalties for non-compliance, reflect the integration of Sharia law into the judicial system. This demonstrates the triumphalist approach to Islam, where Islamic principles shape national identity and societal norms (Sirait et al. 2024, 256). Malaysia's commitment to Islam affects minority religions, with strict limitations on the religious freedoms of groups like Baha'i, Ahmadiyya, and Millah Ibrahim. Despite its role in the UN Human Rights Council (2022–2024), these restrictions highlight the majority religion's significant influence on governance, laws, and society (Musa 2022, 28). In short, Malaysia's governance system reflects a state-sanctioned Islamic model that deeply influences laws, regulations, and social life, highlighting the strong connection between religion and the state.

Brunei Darussalam

Brunei Darussalam, a monarchy, has adopted the philosophy of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) as its guiding principle of governance. This ideology was formally embraced following Brunei's independence in 1984 as a means to consolidate national unity and address internal challenges, including past revolts within its territory. MIB is built upon three core components. First, Malay Culture which emphasizes the Malay language and cultural heritage as integral to Brunei's national identity. Second, Islam which serves as the state religion and influences education, law, and social norms. Third, the Sultan who is the central figure in governance, tasked with upholding and promoting the principles of MIB (Sharbawi & Mabud 2021, 49).

This framework has led to broad acceptance of governance among Brunei's citizens, encompassing both majority and minority religious communities. According to ISEAS data, Brunei's population includes 16,000 individuals from minority groups, constituting 6.7% of society. These groups include Protestants (3.7%), Roman Catholics, animists (particularly among the Dusun people), and other faiths. Despite their minority status, these groups coexist peacefully, reflecting a culture of mutual tolerance in Brunei (Hoon & Kumpoh 2024, 2-8).

The concept of MIB is rooted in the sultanate era and was further reinforced during the colonial period. Colonial influences complemented the Sultan's policies aimed at fostering national prosperity and strengthening Brunei's identity. Islam, as the dominant religion, has historically followed a top-down approach, stemming from the sultanate's leadership. Islam profoundly shapes Brunei's civic identity, nationalism, politics, economy, and social life, underscoring its central role in defining the nation's identity and policies (Pratama et al. 2023, 44).

Buddhism's Role in Southeast Asia: Religion, Nationalism, and Citizenship

Buddhism has been a cornerstone of identity, governance, and citizenship in several Southeast Asian nations. Its influence extends beyond spiritual practices, shaping political systems, cultural norms, and national identities.

Thailand

Since the 19th century, the Thai government has utilized Buddhism to establish political legitimacy. The significance of Buddhism as Thailand's predominant religion is closely linked to the enactment of the *Sangha Law*

in 1902, which granted monks legal authority and integrated them into the state apparatus (Dubus 2018, 9). Through the Sangha Council, nominated monks assumed strategic role as extensions of the Thai government, carrying out the King's directives and influencing the nation's collective identity.

Controversies have occasionally disrupted this harmonious relationship. The Dhammakāya temple, known for its acceptance of doctrinal and practical innovations, has sparked theological disputes due to its deviations from traditional Thai Buddhism (Scott 2006, 228-229). Similarly, the Asoke Movement, with its strict vegan doctrines and active political engagement, challenged the Buddhist majority. This movement grew into a political force, founding the Palang Dharma Party, which entered Thai politics in 1988, and later aligning with the Thai Rak Thai party for the 2000 general election (Heikkilä-Horn 2015, 181-182).

The Sangha Law underwent significant revisions amidst political turmoil. In 1932, reform-minded young monks sought to amend the law, which favored certain Buddhist sects. By 1946, a democratic process established judicial, legislative, and executive bodies within the Sangha Council under the King's oversight. However, this system was abolished in 1957, replaced by a new Sangha Law in 1962 that reinstated the centralized council under royal authority. Despite ongoing controversies, the Sangha Council continues to wield considerable influence in Thailand (Tonsakulrungruang 2018). Monks' engagement in theological and political conflicts has played a pivotal role in shaping Thai nationalism and citizenship. For instance, following the 2014 military coup, the government attempted to consolidate control over Buddhist institutions, reflecting concerns about the dominant religion's role in national identity (Larsson 2020, 1). Buddhism's influence extends beyond governance, permeating Thailand's media landscape. Buddhist religious programming dominates television broadcasts, reinforcing the religion's cultural and societal prominence (Pitpreecha et al. 2016, 109).

Myanmar

Myanmar's population largely embraces Buddhist nationalism as a unifying force, with approximately 85% of them adhering to Theravada Buddhism (Moe 2017, 104). The emergence of Buddhist nationalist discourse in Myanmar is driven by concerns over the racial identity of the Burmese nation and the perceived growing influence of Islam. Historically, between 1878 and 1885, Buddhist nationalism was employed as a key component of national identity, shaped by anti-colonial and Islamophobic sentiments that fueled both popular movements and state policies. The

government has politicized Buddhist nationalism, embedding it into its governance structures (Yutthaworakool 2017, 133). The expulsion of the Rohingya Muslim population exemplifies the pervasive influence of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar. Buddhism has maintained an indissoluble connection with the state, often dominating other religions and shaping social and political circumstances (Foxeus 2022, 429).

Islamophobia in Myanmar can be traced back to 1938 during the colonial era when political and economic crises led to Muslims being scapegoated (Bowser 2021, 1121). Nationalist Buddhist movements, particularly targeting the Rohingya, have emerged under the belief that Muslims undermine Myanmar's national identity. Movements like the 969 Movement and the Ma Ba Ta Movement have continued to propagate Buddhist-nationalist ideology since 2012 (Foxeus 2019, 669).

Buddhism in Myanmar has become a powerful symbol of nationalism, often at the center of conflicts over citizenship claims. The Rohingya conflict, while framed as a citizenship dispute, is deeply rooted in nationalism and has fueled Islamophobia in Southeast Asia. This is despite the fact that Islam and Buddhism coexisted harmoniously in Myanmar for centuries (Yusuf 2018, 513).

Cambodia

Since Cambodia gained independence on November 9, 1953, Theravada Buddhism has been recognized as the state religion. By 1969, Cambodia had 65,062 Buddhist monks and 3,369 Buddhist temples. However, Cambodia's Buddhist heritage faced a devastating setback during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) under Pol Pot, who implemented Communist ideology through the Democratic Kampuchea regime. During this period, an estimated two million Cambodians perished, temples were destroyed, and monks were forced to abandon their yellow robes (Kobayashi 2005, 494-495).

In the aftermath of this tragedy, Buddhist leaders focused on rebuilding through four key resources: religious authority, cultural knowledge, social networks, and communication technologies. Since the 1990s, they have played a vital role in peacebuilding efforts, supported by local communities and government authorities (Soeung & Lee 2017, 144). Today, Theravada Buddhism is practiced by approximately 93% of Cambodians, making it the dominant religion with significant influence over governance and social development. Constitutionally, Theravada Buddhism was reaffirmed as Cambodia's state religion in 1993 (Lawrence 2022, 264).

While Buddhism remains dominant, Cambodia has recognized minority religions. The Cham Muslim community, known as Kan Imam San, practices a unique form of Cambodian Islam and has been officially acknowledged since 1998 (Bruckmayr 2017, 198). Christianity, as another minority religion, has reinterpreted its theology to reflect Khmer culture, resulting in Khmer evangelicalism. Some Cambodians even practice a blend of Christianity and Buddhism, creating a unique form of religious hybridity (Wong 2020, 265).

Cambodian nationalism, reawakened after the Khmer Rouge tragedy, has been strongly influenced by Theravada Buddhism. What began as a civic identity tied to the Khmer ethnic majority has evolved into a symbol of Cambodian citizenship, uniting the population regardless of religious background.

Laos

Approximately 65% of Laos' population practices Buddhism, despite the country's adherence to communism. Religious affairs in Laos are closely monitored and regulated by the government. An amalgamation of Marxist and Buddhist ideologies was implemented, as both are perceived to share parallels in promoting societal advancement. Consequently, supernatural elements of Buddhism were abandoned to create a more rational national religion, a process that began on June 30, 1976. Since 1990, Buddhism has been officially recognized by the Lao government as a legitimate institution, with its integration into governance under strict supervision. While this development faced resistance from hardline communists (Ladwig 2014, 1883), the Lao government has since supported Buddhism, as evidenced by its recognition of Buddhist holidays as national holidays and the designation of Buddhist relics as cultural heritage (Bouté 2021, 86-87).

Buddhism has played a critical role in shaping Lao national identity. Laos' image as a Buddhist nation is inseparable from its history. Since the 17th century, Lao kingdoms have embraced Buddhism, and the country boasts numerous Buddhist heritage sites, including the Luang Prabang heritage site, now part of UNESCO (Bear et al. 2021, 458). The Lao government acknowledges Buddhism as an integral part of its cultural history, honoring the kings of Buddhist kingdoms as national heroes (Tappe 2013, 443). While Buddhism remains central to Lao culture, the government continues to regulate its growth, requiring both Buddhist and minority religions to align with the state system. Despite being a communist state, Laos is not anti-religious (Gutter 2021, 76). Religion, particularly

Buddhism, is widely recognized and respected. The Buddhist temple, much like the communist symbol, is viewed as a national symbol.

Singapore

According to Pew Research Center data, Buddhism accounts for 26% of Singapore's population. Singapore operates as a secular state with strict regulations on multiculturalism, ensuring that no single religious group dominates. The religious composition of Singapore includes Muslims (18%), Christians (17%), Hindus (8%), followers of Taoism and Confucianism (6%), and other indigenous religions (4%). Around 22% of the population does not adhere to any religion.

Singapore's secular government fosters religious pluralism, repurposing Buddhist temples for interfaith activities. Religious pluralism is deeply ingrained in Singaporean society, fostering acceptance and mutual respect among different faiths. Citizens believe that religious diversity is essential for national progress (Miner 2023). Although Buddhism is the largest religion, Singapore's multicultural philosophy—emphasized by its founding father Lee Kuan Yew—requires an equitable balance of languages, cultures, and religions. This ideal has influenced Singapore's administration and contributed to the unique sense of "Singaporean" nationalism (Tan 2020, 4).

Vietnam

Religion in Vietnam, as in most communist regimes, is tightly regulated. Although multiple polls explore religious adherence in Vietnam, data consistently shows that around 85% of the population does not follow any specific religion. However, approximately 10 million Vietnamese practice a syncretic form of Buddhism that incorporates local beliefs (U.S. Department of State 2022).

Despite viewing religion historically as a potential threat, the Vietnamese government officially recognizes 16 religions, including Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism, Caodaism, and Baha'i. Vietnam also hosts 100 unofficial "new" religions, making it one of the most religiously diverse communist countries (Nong 2019, 15). Government surveillance of religious activities remains strict, with an increasing number of religious prisoners reported in the past decade (Nguyen 2023, 12). However, religious communities have begun expressing their faith cautiously, ensuring their activities avoid conflicts with the state. The Vietnamese government maintains vigilance over religious practices but

has shown openness to new religious movements, provided they do not incite violence or disrupt national stability.

Catholicism's Role in Southeast Asia: Religion, Nationalism, and Citizenship

Catholicism has profoundly influenced the socio-political and cultural landscapes of Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines and Timor Leste. Its historical roots and ongoing role in shaping national identities demonstrate its enduring significance in the region.

The Philippines

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) in 2023, 78.8% of Filipinos identify as Roman Catholics, making the Philippines the largest Catholic nation in Southeast Asia. Catholicism was introduced by Spanish colonizers in the 16th century, deeply embedding itself into the country's cultural and civic identity. The Philippines is often referred to as a "Catholic Nation," reflecting the strong historical and cultural ties between Catholicism and Filipino society (Sapitula 2019, 47). The relationship between the Church and State has evolved over time. While the 1987 Philippine Constitution formally separates the Church from the State, Catholic influence remains visible. Reports suggest that during presidential elections, political parties are often associated with the Catholic faith, with priests subtly favoring certain candidates (Castro 2019, 103). This dynamic has sometimes led to tension, particularly under the administration of Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022), which was marked by frequent anti-Catholic rhetoric. Such criticism diminished the Church's perceived role as a stabilizing force in Philippine society (Abellanos 2018, 55).

While Catholicism is a defining feature of Filipino civic identity, the southern Philippines is home to a strong Muslim community, the Moro Muslims, who have developed their own distinct identity (Kaufman 2013, 13). This regional distinction underscores the religious diversity within the nation. Despite challenges from emerging Christian fundamentalist sects, the Catholic Church remains influential, particularly at the grassroots level. By recruiting local priests, the Church has maintained its reach and popularity, especially in rural areas where its centuries-long presence continues to resonate deeply (Miller n.d.).

Timor Leste

According to the 2015 report of Ministry of Finance of Timor Leste, 97.6% of the country's population identifies as Catholic, making it one of

the most Catholic-dominant nations in the world. Similar to the Philippines, the Roman Catholic Church holds significant socio-political influence. However, unlike the Philippines, where the Church faces government pushback, the Church in Timor Leste operates as an informal but vital structure, particularly following the political turmoil from 2006 to the present (Duarte et al. 2016).

The Church's prominence in Timor Leste is closely tied to the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999), during which Catholicism became a symbol of resistance and a source of national identity. However, this influence has not been without friction. For example, disagreements over religious education in schools highlighted tensions between the Church and the State. These were resolved on May 7, 2005, with a mutual understanding affirming the Church's role in national development, covering areas such as education, socio-economics, politics, culture, and moral guidance. The agreement also covered legal concerns like abortion and prostitution (Hodge 2013, 154).

As a developing nation, Timor Leste looks to the Catholic Church as a cornerstone of its society. Pope Francis' visit in 2024 has heightened these expectations, with the Pope recognizing Timor Leste's Cardinals as key spiritual allies (Brincat 2024). The visit underscores the Church's enduring role as a guiding force in the country's development.

Challenges and Future Prospects of Dominant Religions

Each Southeast Asian country faces unique challenges related to the dominant religion within its borders, as summarized in Table 1. In nations with a Muslim majority, the practices and experiences of integrating religion into governance and society vary significantly. In Brunei Darussalam, Islam, as the guiding ideology of the absolute monarchy, operates under the framework of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB). This worldview seeks to maintain national unity and address regional unrest, such as rebellious uprisings. The development of Brunei's national identity is deeply rooted in Islamic principles, nurtured and preserved by the Sultanate over generations. For instance, the Brunei government strictly enforces regulations aimed at safeguarding the sanctity of Islam. These policies compel non-Islamic religions to continuously adapt and innovate in response to state-imposed restrictions (Hoon & Kumpoh 2024, 8).

Table 1
Multiform Dominant Religion in shaping of Nationalism and Citizenship

Country	Dominant Religion	Key Points
Brunei Darussalam	Islam	Islamic identity influences nationality. The state operates as an absolute monarchy, where Islam helps mitigate regional conflicts and rebellious uprisings.
Malaysia	Islam	Islam is dominant but faces challenges in governance and political power. It plays a crucial role in benefiting both the government and the citizens.
Indonesia	Islam	Multiculturalism is embraced, and Islam is not the sole defining characteristic. Islamic parties and organizations are important for maintaining stability and reflect the unique nature of Indonesian Islam.
Thailand	Buddhism	Buddhism holds significant authority and is directly governed by the King.
Myanmar	Buddhism	Buddhism is an integral part of the cultural fabric and fosters a positive attitude toward other religions.
Cambodia	Buddhism	Buddhism gained popularity following the human tragedy of 1975-1979.
Laos	Buddhism	Buddhism is closely monitored by the government, which views it as a potential threat.
Vietnam	Buddhism	Similar to Laos, Buddhism is surveilled by the government due to concerns about its influence.
Singapore	Buddhism	Modernism is prioritized, and the government upholds the perspective that Singapore's foundation lies in its ethnic and religious diversity.
The Philippines	Roman Catholicism	Catholicism is a significant informal institution, with the Catholic Church playing a major role in political issues.
Timor Leste	Roman Catholicism	Like in the Philippines, Catholicism influences political life, and the Church holds strong religious authority.

In Malaysia, the dominant faith of Islam faces challenges in balancing

government and the populace, its dominance sometimes intersects with issues of identity and citizenship. A notable example is the plight of Rohingya refugees. Despite sharing the Islamic faith, these refugees face marginalization due to conflicts over identity and citizenship, highlighting that religious alignment alone does not guarantee belonging, as political and social factors also play a critical role (Lukmanulhakim & Samuri 2023, 464).

In Indonesia, specific institutions, such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), have been established to cater to the dominant faith. MORA serves as a platform for contestation between major Islamic organizations like *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) and *Muhammadiyah* (Hasyim & Saat 2020, 23). However, Indonesia's philosophy of multiculturalism does not frame Islam as the sole defining characteristic of the nation. Instead, Islam plays a vital role in maintaining state stability and fostering democratic values. Large Islamic organizations and political parties indirectly reflect the distinct nature of Indonesian Islam, which emphasizes flexibility and modernity (Azra 2018, 59). This adaptability has enabled the integration of democratic principles into Indonesia's national identity and citizenship, while preserving its multicultural identity.

Regarding the predominant Buddhist faith, diverse rituals and customs exist across Southeast Asia, resulting from the assimilation of Buddhism with indigenous beliefs. Countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, and Vietnam exhibit distinct Buddhist traditions, reflecting this synthesis. The spread of Buddhism over centuries has led to varied interpretations and practices within each nation. The influence of Buddhism also varies significantly across these countries. In Thailand, Buddhism holds considerable authority as it is directly overseen by the King. In Myanmar, Buddhism is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, fostering a generally positive attitude toward religious pluralism. In Cambodia, Buddhism gained renewed significance in the aftermath of the human tragedy of 1975-1979. Meanwhile, in Laos and Vietnam, both communist nations, the activities of Buddhist institutions are closely monitored due to concerns about their potential impact on governance. In Singapore, the government emphasizes modernism and upholds a philosophy of multiculturalism, highlighting the nation's foundation on a mix of ethnicities and religions.

The Roman Catholic Church plays a pivotal role in predominantly Catholic nations such as the Philippines and Timor Leste, though the nature of its influence differs between the two. Unlike other Southeast Asian countries where Buddhism often intertwines with national and ethnic identity, Catholicism functions as a significant informal institution. Catholic

priests wield considerable influence in political matters, with the Church serving as a powerful religious authority and a reference point for social and political issues in both countries.

The future of dominant religions in Southeast Asia depends largely on their role in safeguarding nationalism and civic identity. Historically, dominant religions have contributed to anti-colonialism discourse, fostering a sense of independence and unity among Southeast Asian nations. In communist and secular states, the predominant religion often aligns with official state objectives. Despite stringent government regulation and supervision, the presence of dominant religions remains undeniable. Efforts to entirely suppress majority religions could create additional complexities, underscoring their enduring relevance in Southeast Asia's cultural and political landscapes.

According to the framework outlined above, the impact of majority religions on religion, nationalism, and citizenship in Southeast Asia can be categorized into three primary typologies. The first occurs when religion is an integral component of the state, shaping governance and national identity. The second typology arises when religion is strictly subordinated to state policies, governed by laws and restrictions that even the majority religion must adhere to. The third typology involves informal religious entities exerting substantial influence over governmental operations.

The rise of puritanism in all major religions poses a significant challenge to the syncretic understanding of religion that characterizes Southeast Asia. At the same time, the relationship between religion, nationalism, and citizenship in the region is shaped by long-standing historical processes, often influenced by political movements in individual countries. Future research should examine the dual role of dominant religions as both sources of conflict and mechanisms for resolution in Southeast Asia. Additionally, the ways in which religions navigate the challenges of religious hybridity resulting from modernity warrant further exploration.

Conclusion

This study identifies three distinct typologies of state-majority religion relations in Southeast Asia. The first typology highlights cases where the dominant religion forms the foundation of civic identity and nationalism, as observed in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand. The second typology involves the restriction of the majority religion to align with state objectives, exemplified by Laos, Vietnam, and Singapore. The third typology demonstrates the role of dominant faiths as

informal institutions that significantly influence governance, as seen in the Philippines and Timor Leste, where the Roman Catholic Church plays a pivotal role.

The Religion Majoritarian Approach (RMA), implemented by the dominant faith, significantly influences the sociopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia. For centuries, the dominant religion has shaped the values and traditions of local communities, even before the region's independence. It served as a unifying force and a catalyst for anti-colonial sentiment, ultimately contributing to the independence movements in Southeast Asia. However, religious conflicts often arise when differing interpretations within the dominant religion leading to competition for influence and authority. Such conflicts frequently involve religious actors operating within the framework of government institutions. Conversely, governments in Southeast Asia leverage the dominant religion to maintain societal peace, often granting specific privileges or designating it as the official state religion to uphold nationalism and citizenship. The study further demonstrates that in secular and communist regimes, majority religions are adapted to conform to state objectives, reflecting the unique governance structures of these nations. Overall, this research underscores that the majority religion in each Southeast Asian country profoundly influences the formation of national identity and citizenship. Whether through political governance, social integration, or cultural practices, religion remains a cornerstone of civic life across the region.

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