

Religion and Identity Politics: Contestation over Muslim Identity in the Democratic States of Indonesia and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of the relationship between religion and identity politics within democratic systems, focusing on the contestation of Muslim identity in Indonesia and Malaysia. In recent decades, religious identity has increasingly played a significant role in political processes in many democratic countries, particularly in states with large Muslim populations. Islam functions not only as a system of religious belief but also as a source of collective identity that can be mobilized in political competition. This study aims to analyze how Muslim identity is constructed, politicized, and contested within the democratic systems of Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as to identify differences in the patterns of identity politics in the two countries. The research employs a qualitative approach using a comparative method based on a literature review and document analysis. Data are obtained from various academic sources, including scholarly literature, journal articles, and documents related to the dynamics of Islamic politics and identity politics in both countries. The analysis is conducted by comparing several key aspects, such as the relationship between religion and the state, the role of political actors and religious organizations, and the patterns of religious identity mobilization in political contestation. The findings indicate that Muslim identity politics in Indonesia develops within a pluralistic state framework that provides space for diverse expressions of religious identity through civil society organizations, political parties, and social movements. In contrast, in Malaysia, Muslim identity is more institutionalized within the state structure, as Islam holds an official position within the political system and is closely linked to Malay ethnic identity. This comparative analysis demonstrates that the contestation of Muslim identity in democratic contexts is strongly influenced by the configuration of relations between religion and the state. The dynamics of identity politics in both countries reflect a complex process of negotiation among religion, power, and democracy in contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Identity Politics; Islam and Democracy; Indonesia–Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the relationship between religion and politics has re-emerged as a significant issue in political science, particularly in democratic countries with large Muslim populations. Earlier modernization theories predicted that the process of modernity would lead to secularization, whereby religion would gradually lose its influence in political life. However, developments in global politics have demonstrated a different trend. As argued by Saiful Mujani, religion has not been entirely marginalized from the public sphere; rather, it continues to persist and has even become increasingly visible in various dynamics of contemporary politics (Mujani, 2007). In practice, religion is often utilized as a source of political legitimacy, a means of shaping collective identity, and a tool for social mobilization within society. Islam, as the majority religion in several countries, plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of identity politics in the era of modern democracy. According to Robert W. Hefner, the presence of Islam in the public sphere is not solely related to religious practices but also involves the processes of social identity formation, political discourse, and the interaction between religious values and contemporary democratic systems (Hefner, 2011).

The phenomenon of identity politics refers to the process in which collective identities such as religion, ethnicity, or culture become the basis for political mobilization and a means of gaining support in struggles for power. Within democratic systems, the space for political freedom enables various groups to express their identities more openly. However, this condition also creates opportunities for political actors to exploit collective identities as instruments for mass mobilization and political legitimacy. Consequently, identity politics often becomes an inseparable part of democratic dynamics, particularly in societies characterized by high levels of social and religious diversity (Castells, 2021).

In Muslim-majority countries, Islamic identity often plays a significant role in political processes. Islam is not only understood as a system of religious belief but also as a source of values, symbols, and legitimacy in public life. In many democratic states, Muslim identity frequently becomes an arena of contestation among various political actors seeking to define the meaning and role of Islam in the public sphere. Such contestation may take the form of

competition among political parties, civil society organizations, and social groups that hold different interpretations regarding the role of religion in the state (Bayat, 2013).

Southeast Asia represents one of the most compelling regions for examining the relationship between Islam, democracy, and identity politics. The region is home to large Muslim populations and has a long history of interaction between religion and politics in the formation of modern states. In many studies of Islamic politics in this region, Indonesia and Malaysia frequently receive particular attention because both countries share similarities as states with predominantly Muslim populations and relatively democratic political systems. Despite these similarities, the two countries demonstrate significant differences in the structure of relations between religion and the state, both in terms of institutional arrangements, public policies, and the political practices that develop within society (Rozi & Mulawarman Hannase, 2025).

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population and is often regarded as an important example of democracy in a Muslim-majority country. Following the end of the authoritarian regime in 1998, marked by the Indonesian Reformasi, Indonesia entered a phase of democratization that opened a broader space for various forms of political expression, including the mobilization of religious identity. Islamic identity has manifested in multiple forms, ranging from the presence of Islamic political parties and civil society organizations to religion-based social movements. Although the state does not constitutionally designate Islam as the official religion, Muslim identity continues to exert a significant influence on political discourse and the dynamics of electoral competition (Mietzner, 2020).

Meanwhile, Malaysia exhibits a different dynamic in the relationship between religion and the state. Within its constitutional system, Islam is recognized as the official religion of the state and holds an important position in the national political structure. Moreover, Muslim identity in Malaysia is closely linked to Malay ethnic identity, which means that the dynamics of identity politics in the country often carry a strong ethno-religious dimension. Political competition between parties such as the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) illustrates how Islamic identity is frequently employed as a source of legitimacy in contests for political power (Robinson, 2011).

These differing political configurations make Indonesia and Malaysia particularly interesting cases for comparative analysis. In Indonesia, Islamic identity develops within the framework of a pluralistic state that emphasizes the principles of diversity and tolerance. Civil society organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah play important roles in shaping the discourse of moderate Islam, which seeks to balance religious values with democratic principles. However, contemporary political dynamics indicate that the mobilization of religious identity remains a significant factor in political competition, particularly in the context of elections and religion-based social movements (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018).

Conversely, in Malaysia, Islamic identity is not merely part of political discourse but is also integrated into the structure of the state and public policy. The state plays an active role in regulating religious institutions, Islamic law (sharia), and Islamic education. In this context, the contestation of Muslim identity often occurs through competition among political actors who seek to demonstrate their Islamic legitimacy to Muslim voters. This process illustrates how religion can function both as a source of legitimacy and as an arena of contestation within democratic politics (Riady, 2025).

A number of studies over the past five years have examined the relationship between religion and identity politics in Muslim-majority countries. For example, research by Octavianne et al. (2024) investigates the growing influence of identity politics in contemporary Muslim societies and finds that elections, social media, and global dynamics have strengthened religious-based identity polarization within democratic systems. The study shows that identity politics can affect political stability while also deepening social fragmentation in pluralistic societies (Helena Octavianne et al., 2024).

Another study conducted by Salahudin et al. (2020) analyzes the polarization of Islamic politics in Indonesia, focusing on identity mobilization during presidential elections. The study finds that religious identity plays a significant role in shaping voter preferences and strengthening political mobilization through social media and networks of religious organizations. However, the research primarily focuses on Indonesia's domestic political

dynamics and does not yet offer a cross-national comparative perspective (Salahudin et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, research conducted by Pakpahan (2024) examines identity politics in public policy in Malaysia and shows that the Malay–Islamic identity serves as a dominant framework in various state policies. The study explains that discourses on Islam and Malay ethnic identity are frequently used as a basis for legitimacy in political policies and state administration (Pakpahan, 2025). On the other hand, research by Halimi (2025) highlights the relationship between religious identity and socio-political dynamics in Indonesia, finding that religious identity has a significant influence on social interactions and public life, particularly when such identities are mobilized within the political arena (Halimi et al., 2025).

Although these studies have made important contributions to understanding the relationship between religion and identity politics, most of them still have certain limitations. Many studies focus on a single country and therefore do not provide a sufficiently comparative analysis of how Muslim identity is contested within democratic political contexts in two countries with different configurations of religion–state relations. Moreover, some studies place greater emphasis on aspects of political polarization or public policy without deeply analyzing the processes through which Muslim identity is constructed and contested within different democratic systems.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to offer a new contribution by analyzing the contestation of Muslim identity in democratic politics through a comparative analysis of Indonesia and Malaysia. By comparing two countries that share similarities as Muslim-majority states but have different configurations of religion–state relations, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Islamic identity is constructed, politicized, and negotiated within democratic systems in Southeast Asia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a comparative method to analyze the dynamics of Muslim identity politics within the democratic systems of Indonesia and

Malaysia. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of the construction of religious identity, the dynamics of political discourse, and the interactions among political actors, state institutions, and society within the context of democracy. The comparative method is used to identify similarities and differences in the patterns of Islamic identity politics in the two countries, thereby enabling a more comprehensive analysis of how Muslim identity is politicized within political systems that have different configurations of relations between religion and the state (Creswell, 2018).

This research falls within the category of comparative political analysis, an approach that compares political phenomena across two or more countries to understand the institutional, social, and ideological variations that shape political dynamics. In this study, Indonesia and Malaysia are selected as case studies because both are countries with predominantly Muslim populations and democratic political systems, yet they exhibit significant differences in the structure of relations between religion and the state. Indonesia adopts a pluralistic state model that does not designate Islam as the official religion of the state. In contrast, Malaysia constitutionally recognizes Islam as the official religion and maintains a more institutionalized relationship between religion and the state. These differences provide a relevant context for analyzing how Muslim identity is constructed and contested within democratic politics.

The data sources for this study were obtained through library research, which included various academic materials such as books, scholarly journal articles, research reports, and official documents related to Islamic politics and identity politics in Indonesia and Malaysia. In addition, this study also utilizes political documents and public discourse, such as political speeches, party manifestos, and publications from religious organizations that are relevant to the mobilization of Islamic identity within the political sphere. The use of these diverse sources of literature aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of identity politics in both countries. (Hamzah, 2020).

Data collection in this study is conducted through document analysis of academic literature and written sources relevant to the research topic. Document analysis enables the researcher to examine how Muslim identity is represented in political discourse, state

policies, and mobilization strategies employed by political actors and religious organizations. Through this technique, the study is able to identify key patterns in the construction and contestation of Islamic identity within democratic politics.

Subsequently, the data obtained are analyzed using a qualitative comparative analysis approach. The analysis is conducted by comparing several key aspects that influence the dynamics of identity politics in Indonesia and Malaysia, including: (1) the structure of relations between religion and the state, (2) the role of political actors and religious organizations in the mobilization of Islamic identity, and (3) the forms of contestation of Muslim identity within the arena of democratic politics. Through this comparative process, the study seeks to identify both general patterns and distinctive characteristics of identity politics in the two countries.

The stages of data analysis are carried out in several steps. First, the researcher identifies and categorizes literature and documents relevant to the theme of Islamic identity politics. Second, the researcher interprets the data to understand how Muslim identity is constructed within political discourse in Indonesia and Malaysia. Third, the results of this interpretation are systematically compared to identify similarities and differences in the patterns of religious identity mobilization in the two countries. This process enables the researcher to draw conclusions regarding the factors that influence the dynamics of identity politics within democratic systems.

Through this methodological approach, the study is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of how Muslim identity becomes an arena of political contestation in Indonesia and Malaysia. Additionally, the comparative method allows this research to make a theoretical contribution to the understanding of the relationship between religion, identity, and democracy in Muslim-majority countries, particularly within the context of Southeast Asian politics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Muslim Identity Politics in Indonesian Democracy

The development of democracy in Indonesia following the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998 brought significant changes to the country's political and social life. Political reforms opened broader opportunities for public participation in political processes and provided greater freedom for various social groups to express their identities in the public sphere (Zulfaqaar, 2024). Religious identity, particularly Islam, has become an important factor in Indonesia's political dynamics. As the country with the world's largest Muslim population, Islam functions not only as a system of religious belief but also as a source of social identity and a political symbol that exerts significant influence in processes of political mobilization (Rahman, 2020).

Within an open democratic system, religious identity is often used as a tool for political mobilization by various political actors. Identity politics refers to the practice of using collective identities such as religion, ethnicity, or culture as a basis for gaining political support and building group solidarity (Munandar & Susanti, 2025). In Indonesia, Islamic identity possesses strong mobilization potential because it is associated with the majority of the population and carries high moral legitimacy within society. This makes Muslim identity one of the key elements in political strategies, both in the context of national and local elections (Muhtadi, 2018).

One manifestation of Islamic identity politics in Indonesia can be observed through the presence of Islamic-based political parties. Since the reform era, several political parties that promote Islamic identity have emerged as important actors in the national political system, such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), the National Awakening Party (PKB), and the United Development Party (PPP). These parties seek to mobilize political support by linking their political agendas to Islamic values and the aspirations of the Muslim community. Nevertheless, support for Islamic parties in elections often fluctuates and does not always reflect the dominance of Islamic politics within Indonesia's democratic system (Tomsa, 2012).

In addition to political parties, Islamic civil society organizations also play a significant role in shaping the dynamics of identity politics in Indonesia. Major organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, wield broad social influence and are frequently engaged in national political discourse. These two organizations function not only as religious institutions but also as civil society actors that play a vital role in maintaining democratic stability. In many cases, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah promote moderate and inclusive interpretations of Islam while emphasizing the importance of tolerance and pluralism in national and civic life (Susanti, 2024).

However, the dynamics of identity politics in Indonesia do not always unfold harmoniously. In some cases, Islamic identity is used as a tool for political mobilization that has the potential to generate social polarization. This phenomenon is clearly visible in various political contests involving religion-based mass mobilization. One example frequently discussed in academic literature is the political mobilization associated with religious movements during several key national political moments. Such mobilization demonstrates how religious symbols and narratives can be used to build group solidarity while simultaneously reinforcing political polarization within society.

The development of social media has also played an important role in strengthening identity politics in Indonesia. Digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have become new spaces for the dissemination of identity-based political discourse. Social media enables political actors, social groups, and individuals to spread religious narratives rapidly and widely to the public (Jamil et al., 2025). In several cases, social media is used to reinforce group identity, disseminate political propaganda, and mobilize support in political contests. This demonstrates that developments in information technology have transformed the ways in which religious identity is utilized in modern politics (Lim, 2017).

Although identity politics is often associated with political polarization, several studies suggest that such dynamics are also part of a normal process within democratic systems. In an open political system, various groups have the right to express their identities and pursue their collective interests through legitimate political mechanisms. In this sense, identity

politics does not necessarily imply conflict or radicalism; rather, it can also serve as a means for social groups to articulate and advance their aspirations within a democratic framework.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that Muslim society in Indonesia does not possess a homogeneous Islamic identity. Various Muslim groups develop diverse interpretations and expressions of Islam in social life, ranging from traditional Islam and modernist Islam to various forms of contemporary Islamic movements. This diversity creates complex dynamics within identity politics, as each Muslim group holds different views regarding the relationship between religion and politics. These differences in interpretation, however, also open spaces for dialogue and negotiation among Muslim groups within Indonesian society (Van Bruinessen, 2013).

In contemporary politics, Islamic identity is also frequently employed by political actors as part of a populist strategy. Religious populism represents a form of political mobilization that combines religious rhetoric with populist narratives emphasizing the conflict between “the people” and “the elite.” In several cases in Indonesia, political actors use religious symbols to construct an image of themselves as authentic representatives of the aspirations of the Muslim community. This strategy is often effective in attracting political support, but it also has the potential to intensify social polarization within society (Hadiz, 2016).

Nevertheless, democracy in Indonesia has also demonstrated a relatively strong capacity to manage the dynamics of identity politics. The presence of an active civil society, a relatively open political system, and a strong tradition of pluralism within society are important factors in maintaining a balance between the expression of religious identity and political stability. Civil society organizations, academics, and the media play important roles in fostering public dialogue on the relationship between religion and politics, as well as in reducing the potential for conflict arising from the mobilization of identity.

Given these phenomena, Muslim identity politics within Indonesia’s democracy can be understood as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. On the one hand, Islamic identity serves as an important source of political legitimacy in political mobilization and electoral competition. On the other hand, the diversity of Islamic interpretations and the

strong tradition of pluralism in Indonesian society create social mechanisms capable of balancing the dynamics of identity politics. This analysis demonstrates that the contestation of Muslim identity in Indonesian politics does not merely reflect conflict or polarization, but also represents a process of negotiation among religious values, democracy, and pluralism within contemporary Muslim society.

Muslim Identity Politics in Malaysian Democracy

The dynamics of the relationship between religion and politics in Malaysia exhibit characteristics that differ from those of other democratic countries in Southeast Asia. Malaysia is a state that constitutionally designates Islam as the official religion of the country, as stated in Article 3 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. This provision grants Islam a special position within the state structure and simultaneously influences various aspects of social and political life (Rozi & Hannase, 2025). In Malaysia, Muslim identity functions not only as a religious identity but also as an important component in the construction of national political identity, which is closely linked to Malay ethnic identity (Robinson, 2011).

The relationship between Malay identity and Islam constitutes one of the defining characteristics of politics in Malaysia. Within the constitutional framework, an individual who is officially recognized as Malay is automatically identified as a Muslim (Noor, 2004). This relationship between religion and ethnicity creates a unique political configuration in Malaysia, in which the Malay–Muslim identity serves as the basis of political legitimacy for various political actors. In practice, identity politics in Malaysia often involves competition among political groups seeking to represent the interests and identity of the Malay–Muslim community within the national political system (Abdul Hamid & Zawawi, 2023).

Since Malaysia's independence in 1957, national politics have largely been dominated by political coalitions led by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). This party has played a significant role in maintaining Malay political dominance while promoting Islamic identity as part of its political legitimacy. In many cases, UMNO has employed Islamic symbols and rhetoric to strengthen its position as the primary representative of Muslim interests in Malaysia. However, UMNO's political dominance has also faced

challenges from Islamic parties that offer different interpretations regarding the role of Islam in the state (Hasanah, 2022).

One of the key actors in the dynamics of Islamic identity politics in Malaysia is the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). This party has a more explicit political agenda in promoting Islam as a foundational basis for governance and public policy. PAS frequently emphasizes the importance of implementing Sharia values within the country's political and legal systems. In various political contests, the party seeks to mobilize support from Muslim voters by emphasizing religious identity as a source of political legitimacy. The competition between the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and PAS for the support of Muslim constituents illustrates how Islamic identity has become a significant arena of contestation in Malaysian politics (Andri, 2022).

In addition to political parties, the state also plays a highly significant role in managing religious institutions in Malaysia. The government has the authority to regulate various aspects of religious life, including mosque administration, Islamic education, and the Sharia judicial system. Each state in Malaysia has its own religious authority operating under the supervision of the sultan or the respective state government. This institutional structure demonstrates that Islam is not only present in political discourse but is also institutionally integrated into Malaysia's system of governance.

State involvement in the management of religion also influences the process of shaping Muslim identity within Malaysian society. The state frequently employs public policies and religious institutions to reinforce Islamic identity as an integral part of the national identity. For instance, the Islamization policies that have developed since the 1980s have encouraged the expansion of the role of religious institutions in education, public administration, and social life. This process has not only strengthened religious identity in the public sphere but has also influenced the dynamics of identity politics in Malaysia.

Identity politics in Malaysia is not only related to religion but is also closely tied to the structure of a multiethnic society. Malaysia has a diverse population, including significant Chinese and Indian communities both demographically and economically. This diversity creates challenges for the Malaysian political system in maintaining a balance between the

Malay–Muslim identity and the principles of pluralism within a multiethnic state. The mobilization of Islamic identity can generate political tensions between majority and minority groups (Shukri, 2023).

In contemporary democracy, the dynamics of identity politics in Malaysia have also undergone significant changes. Political developments over the past two decades have revealed increasing competition among various party coalitions, as well as shifts in the configuration of national power. More competitive elections have created opportunities for political actors to utilize religious identity as a strategy for political mobilization. In this context, Islamic identity is often employed as a moral and political symbol that holds strong appeal for Muslim voters (Welsh, 2018).

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Although identity politics is often associated with the potential for social conflict, several studies indicate that such dynamics are also part of the democratization process in Malaysia. In a competitive political system, various groups have the opportunity to express their identities and pursue political interests through democratic mechanisms. Religious identity can function both as a source of political mobilization and as a means of strengthening public political participation.

The use of religious identity in politics also sparks debates regarding the future of pluralism and democracy in Malaysia. Some observers argue that mobilizing the Malay–Muslim identity can bolster the government’s political legitimacy, but it also risks limiting the space available for minority groups within the political system (Fahrezi et al., 2025). Therefore, the relationship between religion, identity, and democracy in Malaysia remains a key topic in contemporary political science research

Overall, Muslim identity politics within Malaysia's democracy demonstrates that religion plays a highly significant role in shaping the dynamics of national politics. Islamic identity functions not only as a religious symbol but also as a source of political legitimacy employed by various political actors in the competition for power. At the same time, the state's institutional integration of religion into the system of governance also influences how Muslim identity is constructed and contested within the political arena. The dynamics of identity politics in Malaysia reflect the complex interaction between religion, ethnicity, and power within a multiethnic democratic system.

The Contestation of Muslim Identity in Indonesia and Malaysia

The contestation of Muslim identity within the democratic systems of Indonesia and Malaysia exhibits different dynamics, despite both countries sharing the characteristic of having predominantly Muslim populations in Southeast Asia. In contemporary democracies, religious identity often serves as a source of political legitimacy, employed by various actors to gain public support. Islamic identity is understood not only as a religious identity but also as a political symbol with strong mobilization potential within society (Idi, 2018).

The main difference between Indonesia and Malaysia lies in the configuration of relations between religion and the state. Indonesia follows a pluralistic state model that does not designate Islam as the official religion. The state ideology, based on Pancasila, positions religion as an important element of social life but does not grant institutional dominance to any particular religion within the political system (Faisal, 2018). Within this framework, Muslim identity in Indonesia develops through the dynamics of civil society, religious organizations, and electoral political competition. In contrast, Malaysia has a different political configuration, as Islam is recognized as the official religion of the state and holds a prominent position within the constitutional structure and public policy. Moreover, Muslim identity in Malaysia is closely linked to Malay ethnic identity, which occupies a dominant position within the national political system.

To clarify the differences in the patterns of Muslim identity contestation in the two countries, the following table summarizes several key aspects of identity politics dynamics in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Table 1. Comparative Patterns of Muslim Identity Contestation in Indonesia and Malaysia

Analytical Aspects	Indonesia	Malaysia
Status of Islam in the State	Not the official state religion	Islam is the official state religion
Basis of Muslim Identity	Pluralistic religious identity	Religious identity closely linked to Malay ethnicity
Political Actors	Islamic political parties, civil society organizations	Malay–Muslim political parties and state institutions
Mobilization Patterns	Social and electoral mobilization	Mobilization through state institutions and political parties
Religion–State Relationship	Relatively separate	Integrated within the state structure

Source: *Compiled by the author from Faisal (2018), Idi (2018), and related literature.*

The table above shows that the main difference between Indonesia and Malaysia lies in the institutional position of Islam within the state. In Indonesia, Islamic identity develops through the dynamics of civil society and religious organizations that exert significant influence in the public sphere. Organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah play a crucial role in shaping a moderate Islamic discourse that seeks to balance religious values with democratic principles. In contrast, in Malaysia, Islamic identity is more deeply integrated into the state structure and is often used as a basis for political legitimacy by parties representing the Malay-Muslim identity.

These differences indicate that Islamic identity politics in the two countries follow distinct models. Indonesia can be categorized as a pluralistic model, in which Islamic identity evolves through a variety of social and political actors. In contrast, Malaysia reflects a more institutionalized model, as Islamic identity holds a formal position within the political system and state policies. These differences are illustrated more clearly in the following table.

Table 2. Models of Muslim Identity Politics in Indonesia and Malaysia

Analytical Dimension	Pluralistic Model (Indonesia)	Institutional Model (Malaysia)
State Character	Pluralistic state	State with Islam as the official religion
Source of Legitimacy	Civil society and Islamic organizations	State and political institutions
Dominant Actors	Islamic organizations and political parties	Political parties and state institutions
Forms of Contestation	Moderate Islamic discourse and social mobilization	Political legitimacy based on Malay–Islamic identity
Impact on Democracy	Electoral polarization, yet the system remains pluralistic	Ethno-religious political legitimacy

Source: *Author's elaboration based on Faisal (2018), Idi (2018), and comparative analysis conducted by the author.*

The dynamics of Muslim identity contestation in Indonesia and Malaysia can also be explained through a conceptual model that illustrates the relationship between democracy, religious identity mobilization, and state structure. This model shows that the contestation of Muslim identity within a democracy is influenced by the interaction among political actors, state institutions, and civil society.

Based on the discussion above, the contestation of Muslim identity in Indonesia and Malaysia reflects a complex process of negotiation between religion, identity, and power within democratic systems. This comparative analysis demonstrates that Islamic identity politics cannot be understood in isolation but must be viewed within the historical, social, and institutional contexts that shape political dynamics in each country. The study shows that although Islamic identity often serves as a source of political mobilization, the presence of

democratic institutions and civil society also plays a crucial role in managing these dynamics to ensure they remain within a framework of stable democracy.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Muslim identity politics plays a significant role in the dynamics of democracy in Indonesia and Malaysia, even though both nations develop within different political contexts. In Indonesia, Islamic identity evolves within a pluralistic state framework that does not establish religion as the basis of the state. As a result, expressions of Muslim identity primarily emerge through civil society activities, social movements, and electoral competition. While the mobilization of religious identity frequently occurs in various political contests, the presence of moderate Islamic organizations and the strong tradition of pluralism in society help maintain a balance between the expression of religious identity and democratic stability. In contrast, in Malaysia, Muslim identity is more institutionalized within the state structure, as Islam is recognized as the official religion and is closely linked to Malay ethnic identity. This situation means that Islamic identity politics develops not only in social and political spheres but is also reflected in state policies and government institutions. The comparison between the two countries indicates that the dynamics of Muslim identity politics within democratic systems are heavily influenced by how the relationship between religion and the state is structured. The experiences of Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrate that identity politics in contemporary Muslim societies results from a complex process of negotiation among religion, power, and democratic practices.

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