GREASE
Religion, Diversity and Radicalisation

POLICY BRIEF

Managing Religious Diversity and Radicalisation in Malaysia and Indonesia

Introduction

Malaysia and Indonesia are Muslim-majority countries with a significant presence of other religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Both countries face major challenges in managing religious diversity and countering religiously inspired radicalisation. This policy brief provides insights into the successes and trade-offs of both countries in their efforts to address these challenges.

While Islamist militancy has been more pronounced in Indonesia, top-down, state-driven Islamisation is increasing in Malaysia, infringing on the civil liberties of both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Meanwhile, each state is now coping with a vocal strain of majoritarianism that seeks to exploit Islam's status as the official or majority religion in order to impose an anti-pluralist and ultra-conservative version of it. In doing so, right-wing Muslim majoritarianism is undermining efforts to successfully manage religious diversity in both countries.

Comparing experiences with radicalisation, the case of Indonesia suggests that its greater degree of intra-Muslim diversity and more vibrant Muslim civil society has enabled the cultivation of different interpretations of moderate Islam to counter radical ones.

The recommendations offered in this policy brief are addressed primarily to Indonesian and Malaysian stakeholders who have to make difficult choices to counter the threat of right-wing religious majoritarianism.

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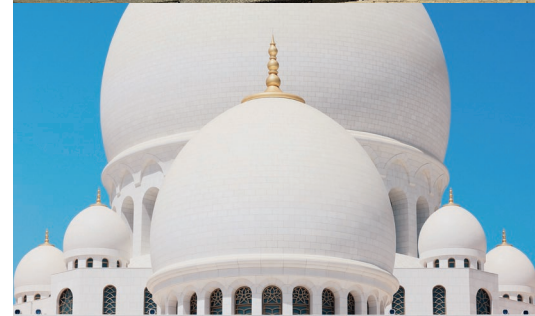
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What makes Malaysia and Indonesia relevant for policymakers elsewhere?

There are three reasons why the cases of Malaysia and Indonesia might attract the attention of policy-makers outside the region.

First, Malaysia and Indonesia are flawed democracies that nevertheless still hold competitive elections regularly. Indeed, Indonesia is the world's third-largest democracy (in addition to being the world's most populous Muslim state). Facing the twin challenges of democratisation and managing religious diversity, Malaysia and Indonesia provide good case studies for policymakers seeking to balance the demands of different religious (and non-religious) communities while maintaining democratic freedoms and rights for all.

Second, Malaysia and Indonesia provide examples of how religious actors can pose a significant threat to religious freedom and diversity. With such actors eroding the spirit of secular neutrality that undergird state management of religious diversity, Malaysia and Indonesia illustrate the challenges of instituting 'post-secular' ways of managing religious diversity, not least the risks of being too accommodative towards religio-conservative demands that may end up normalising intolerant views and nativist agendas. A nuanced understanding of how civil society and religious minorities in these countries have to contend with the challenges of right-wing Muslim majoritarianism can help European Union policymakers calibrate their foreign policy and external engagements towards more productive ends.

Third, even as Muslim-majority states, Malaysia and Indonesia face a different situation of Islamist militancy than the MENA states that usually grab media attention. Transnational militant Islamist projects such as those inspired by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have only limited appeals to local Islamist actors, including radical ones.

Indonesia

Management of Religious Diversity

Indonesia's management of religious diversity is largely based on the state philosophy of the Pancasila. Though some 85 percent of Indonesians identify as Muslim, the Pancasila recognises six official religions (without privileging any, to the chagrin of many Islamists). Seeing that it still enjoys tremendous public support, the Pancasila remains a useful, if imperfect, frame of reference for adjudicating complicated questions regarding state-religion relations. However, the rise of right-wing Muslim majoritarianism threatens the principles of secular neutrality the Pancasila seeks to preserve.

The challenge posed by right-wing Muslim majoritarianism in Indonesia was vividly illustrated by the anti-Ahok rally (widely known as the "212 Rally") that witnessed up to 200,000 protestors rallying in the streets of Jakarta in December 2016. Whereas the incident was supposedly about blasphemous remarks allegedly made by the gubernatorial candidate Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's (popularly known as Ahok), the movement was defined by significant anti-Christian and anti-Chinese sentiments (Ahok is Chinese and Christian). Even though this sense of Muslim solidarity fizzled soon after, the movement's success in blocking Ahok's run for governor[1] shows how Muslim majoritarian narratives that rely on manufactured 'offence-taking', hate speech, and misinformation can drive identity politics in a way that undermines Indonesia's civil liberties, religious freedom, and communal relations. This framing of (Sunni) Muslims against Christians generates fears of a repeat of the communal violence that pitted Christian and Muslim militias against each other in the Moluccan Islands in the early 2000s, which resulted in 5,000 deaths and hundreds of thousands displaced.

To be sure, the expression of right-wing religious majoritarianism is not confined to high-profile political events. It has taken shape in many domains of Indonesian society. Survey results have noted religiously intolerant outlooks amongst many Indonesians, including the youth.

Religiously Inspired Violent Radicalisation

671 Indonesians are reported to have joined the insurgency led by the radical islamist group ISIS. Though that number is insignificant relative to the

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1   Ahok lost his run for governor of Jakarta at the run-offs stage despite having a double-digit lead one year ago. He was later sentenced to jail for 2 years for blasphemy.

country's population, it is nonetheless the largest contingent of foreign fighters from Southeast Asia. Its fighters also led the Khatibah Nusantara, the Southeast Asian regiment for ISIS. Indonesians' involvement in Islamist militancy has roots that stretch back to the Darul Islam movement that had fought against the Indonesian republic starting in the 1950s. The notorious Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an alleged Al-Qaeda affiliate that masterminded the Bali bombings in 2002, is also a spinoff of Darul Islam. However, a combination of ISIS's defeat in 2018 and effective counter-terror policing has significantly undermined the potency of Islamist militancy in Indonesia.

Three challenges remain in addressing the threat of violent radicalisation for the Indonesian state in the upcoming years. First, militant groups like JI have undergone a 'domestication' phase whereby they opted for a 'political front' to pursue their goal of subjecting Indonesia to a radical version of Islamic rule. This resorting to non-violent tactics, such as through social programmes and state infiltration, have made JI harder to detect and defuse. Second, researchers have noted cross-pollinations between discourses of Muslim majoritarianism and Islamist militancy. This means that the politicisation of the ummah (the Muslim collective) within a grievance discourse by mainstream political actors (as mentioned above) can aid the recruitment efforts of fringe groups like JI, if not inspire violence itself.

Third, Indonesia also saw a mirroring of global trends of Islamist terrorism elsewhere, where bombings have targeted non-Muslim houses of worship (especially churches) in recent years. This implies that, despite the relatively low level of violent threats, interfaith relations may be permanently damaged if an attack occurs.

Malaysia

Management of Religious Diversity

In Malaysia, where nearly 40 percent of the population is non-Muslim, management of religious diversity is generally undertaken through the prism of racial politics. The interests of the Malay-Muslim majority are weighed against the demands of a significant non-Muslim minority comprising of ethnic Chinese and Indians in Peninsular Malaysia, as well as indigenous groups in the Bornean state of Sabah and Sarawak where a considerable proportion are Christians. Notwithstanding its problematic connotations, the idea of 'race' has been institutionalised

since colonial rule in Malaysian politics. The term is embedded in the Constitution and informs the country's race-based affirmative action that confers special privileges in scholarships, housing, and commerce to the bumiputeras (indigenous people of Malaysia), the majority of whom are Malays.

As the majority 'Malay' ethnicity is constitutionally defined as Muslim, the overlapping of racial and religious politics is almost inevitable. Malay race-based parties[2] routinely rally support by issuing calls for Muslim solidarity. Since the 1980s this pivot to Muslim identity has intensified politically through an 'Islamisation race' between two camps: the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party; and the Islamist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). Social Islamisation programmes pursued by an empowered Islamic bureaucracy and dakwah (proselytisation) activists have also contributed to the phenomenon.

In recent years, Malaysia has witnessed the emergence of right-wing Muslim majoritarian politics propelled by two factors. First, after the long-ruling Barisan Nasional's electoral defeat in 2018, an increasingly fragmented Malay-Muslim political landscape saw anxious politicians eager to appeal to this idea of a united ummah for legitimacy, which they often conjured through narratives that portrayed the non-Muslim 'other' as politically threatening and morally suspect.

Second, the Malaysian socio-political landscape also witnessed the rise of a number of right-wing Islamist pressure groups seeking to promote and popularise revisionist ideas about Islam's supremacy in Malaysia while labelling anyone who disagreed with them, including Muslims, as 'enemies of Islam'.

These social and political changes exerted significant pressures on the governance of Malaysia's religiously diverse society. Overpowering narratives of Malay-Muslim majoritarianism often reduce individual and collective differences (e.g. ethnic, gender, cultural, class, geographical) to religious differences, thus portraying such differences as having theological, therefore existential stakes.

Religiously Inspired Violent Radicalisation

Compared to Indonesia, the scarcity of violent attacks in Malaysia (with only one attack attributed to ISIS thus far) and a much smaller number of its citizens joining ISIS in Syria speaks to the country's

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2   Malaysia is probably the only country in the world where there are political parties with constitutions that limit the ethnicity of its members.

relative success in countering violent extremism (CVE). However, a lack of access to solid counter-terror related data (e.g. detainees and case files) means it is difficult to assess if such success is attributable to punitive counter-terror laws and effective rehabilitation, or whether there is simply a lower baseline of violence in Malaysia. For example, a think tank has challenged the government's self-reported 98 percent deradicalisation success rate. It was also argued that Malaysia's CVE emphasis on correcting interpretations of Islam may have resulted in the systemic overlooking of root causes for radicalisation.

A journal article claims that Malaysia's success is attributable to effective policing and the 'overlapping range of rhetoric and practices between ISIS and Malaysian state actors' in Malaysia's Islamisation programmes. But this also means the lack of violence does not preclude the future possibility of harsher forms of Islamic governance in Malaysia that would ultimately undermine its religious diversity and peace.

Comparative Insights

As mentioned above, Malaysia and Indonesia are both plagued by the rising challenges of right-wing Muslim majoritarianism. They also share another similarity: expressions of right-wing Muslim majoritarianism that imagine as their enemy an economically powerful ethnic Chinese minority (a stereotype that defies reality). As these Chinese minorities tend to be of non-Muslim faiths, such anti-Chinese sentiments fuelled conspiracy theories framed around themes of Muslim existentialism. Both countries also saw hate speech and misinformation employed to create moments of hateful majoritarian mobilisation.

However, the two cases have unfolded in vastly different political structures and social conditions. Thus, a contrast can reveal push factors and embedded risks that policymakers should be aware of when crafting policies that encourage the flourishing of religious diversity in the respective countries.

In Malaysia, the governance of religious diversity and radicalisation is more successful if one measures it by the low incidence of violence and militancy. Having a more diverse religious makeup means that different communities are used to sharing social spaces, even if ethnic segregation still marks the lived experiences of many.

Yet Malaysia's highly centralised state and its dependence on a winner-takes-all First-Past-The-Post electoral system mean that its political in-

stitutions are vulnerable to state capture by anti-pluralist, ultra-conservative elements. In that event, the state's coercive power can easily be channelled towards disrupting the political order and social norms that enable the flourishing of religious diversity and harmony in Malaysia. As seen in the case of India, when the weight of the state is thrown around a religiously-inspired majoritarian project, effective resistance from the outside can be inexorably difficult. Moreover, in Pew Surveys published in 2013, Malaysians scored higher than the Indonesians in their pro-orthodoxy and, at times, pro-radicalism views, as seen in their higher support for making the sharia the law of the land; higher support for the death penalty for those leaving Islam; having more favourable views towards IS; and with more believing that suicide bombing can be justified. This suggests that the long-term challenge of managing religious diversity in Malaysia should be about inculcating an intellectual milieu where these exclusivist views can be diversified, contained, and challenged productively.

In Indonesia, the many instances of communal and terrorist violence undermine its claims to be a champion of religious diversity. But it also provides some reasons for hope. For example, one can safely argue that Indonesia's intra-Muslim diversity is significantly higher than Malaysia's. Indonesia plays host to various forms of Islam. While some practice a syncretic (abangan) and a more orthodox (santri) form of Islam, other Muslims identify as traditionalist, modernist, and even liberal. Due to the lack of a state-defined orthodoxy that is found in Malaysia, different Muslim identities, organisations, and practices generally enjoy more latitude for expression and mobilisation (perhaps barring the Shia and Ahmadiyah community) in Indonesia. Mass non-governmental Muslim organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (which is currently spearheading a reformist campaign for a more diversity-friendly form of Islam) and Muhammadiyah are simply not found in Malaysia.

As a result, the room for vibrant debate surrounding matters of theology, politics, and practice is also observably wider in Indonesia. For example, an academic book criticising the alliance between the ulema (religious scholars) and the state has won a book award from one of Indonesia's largest publishers–something unthinkable in Malaysia. Indonesia's more fluid and decentralised political system also partly defuses religion's potency as a marker for social division and mobilisation. Meanwhile in Malaysia, the fear of losing Malay-Muslim hegemony is often cited as the reason for opposing local elections.

To summarise, the Malaysian case highlights the advantages of an effective and centralised state if it is governed by actors committed to multicultural representation, and the pitfalls if it moves away from such an ideal. On the other hand, the Indonesian case stresses how intra-religious and intellectual vibrancy is instrumental in moderating the influence of right-wing Muslim majoritarianism. After all, appeals for a less-tolerant, less-diverse, and more authoritarian religious state in Malaysia and Indonesia are usually couched in religio-ideological terms and therefore have to be engaged as resilient ideas in the long term.

Policy Recommendations

It is important to not conflate the task of managing religious diversity with addressing religiously inspired violent radicalisation. These two undertakings often involve dealing with different actors and policy priorities. For example, counter-terror operations are central to tackling violent radicalisation, but indiscriminate accusations of terrorism may risk a social backlash that fuels greater inter-religious tensions. This can be seen in a case where a sudden and contentious crackdown on political figures accused of supporting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has contributed to rising social tensions between Hindu and Muslim groups in Malaysia.
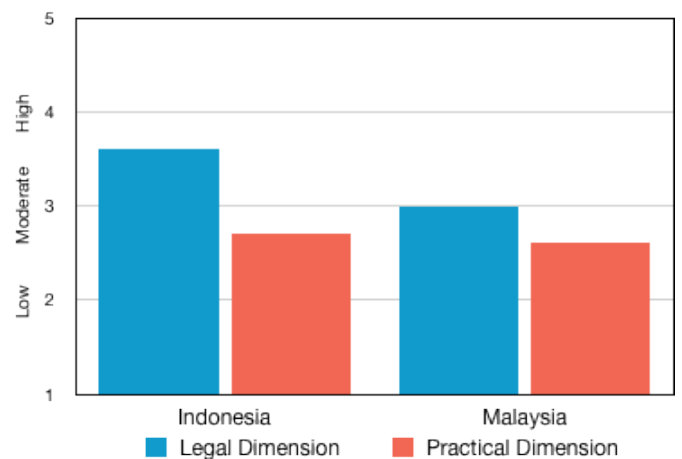
Recognising the limited influence of EU institutions in addressing the challenges faced by Malaysia and Indonesia, this policy brief does not offer detailed recommendations for EU stakeholders.

Figure 1: Level of Freedom of Religious Institutions from the State
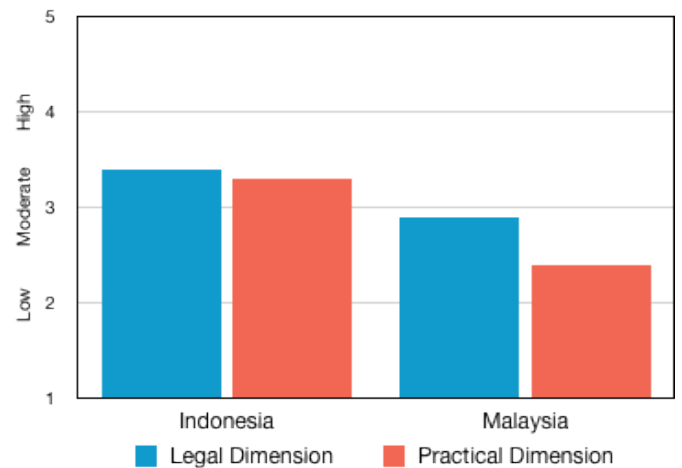
Source: GREASE Indicators

Figure 2: Level of Rights of Religious Minority Groups

Source: GREASE Indicators

Indonesia

Short/medium-term recommendations

The government

- Repeal and revise controversial laws, such as the anti-pornography and anti-blasphemy laws, which can easily be used to incentivise a politics of offence-taking that fuels the growth of majoritarian religious movements.

- Establish a task force to address online misinformation and hate speech. Fact-finding missions should be paired with timely, transparent, and effective public communication.

State institutions

- Start preparing for politically contentious moments such as the 2024 elections and be well-equipped with communication, monitoring, and enforcement tools to deal with hate speech and misinformation.

- Strengthen electoral rules to increase transparency to political financing to uncover perpetrators of hate campaigns.

- Refine laws on hate speech to balance it with context-specific and freedom of (critical) speech considerations, alongside a greater emphasis on the protection of minorities.

- Strengthen the rule of law against vigilantism and the issue of systemic violence and discrimination targeting religious minorities. Work with civil society to demand greater accountability and responsiveness from social media platforms, especially in dealing with online radicalisation and the platforming and viralling of hate speech and misinformation.

Long-term recommendations

Policymakers

- Take seriously the idea that sustainable and equitable development and reducing corruption and economic exploitation are central to managing religious diversity in Indonesia.

State institutions and civil society

- Reaffirm the Pancasila and leverage Indonesia's Islam Nusantara campaign to develop and promote interfaith dialogue and critical education and rally national opinion towards a more inclusive nation-building agenda.

State institutions

- Perform a national audit of religious education in Indonesia that assesses its teaching materials, pedagogy, and staffing while offering incentives for gradual reform.

Malaysia

Short/medium-term recommendations

Security authorities

- Enhance fact-finding capacities and conventionalise the setting up of investigative task forces so that swift, professional, and impartial investigations of incendiary incidents can pre-empt issue exploitation by online hatred entrepreneurs.

- Enhance collaboration and data-sharing with civil society organisations and academics to advance research on radicalisation in Malaysia. A greater appreciation of the role of research in addressing violent extremism can help Malaysia catch up with the granular analysis found in Indonesia.

State institutions and the media

- Learn to recognise the tactics of hate spin and address them accordingly via actor-centric, instead of society-centric, strategies. For example, deplatforming repetitive aggressors who capitalised on 'religious offendedness' to encourage hate speech and individual harm is more important than criminalising 'offensive speech' on a societal level.

Policymakers and civil society

- Set up local channels of conflict resolution to avoid the hyper-politicisation of local disputes. Having local mediation structures also disincentivises judicial and federal interventions, which often sensationalise issues and generate more social polarisation.

Policymakers

- Streamline legislation that criminalises hate speech that is now straddled across multiple legislations, such as the Sedition Act, the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, and the Penal Code. Caution should be exercised to ensure that hate speech legislation cannot be abused to shield state authorities, be it political or religious, from critique.

State institutions and civil society

- Demand greater accountability and responsiveness from social media platforms, especially in dealing with online radicalisation and the platforming and viralling of hate speech.

Long- term recommendations

Policymakers

- Prioritise academic rigour as much as academic freedom in tertiary education reform. Universities should be reformed into safe spaces committed to inclusivity, independent and critical inquiry, and intellectual pluralism, all of which are vital to maintaining a healthy social ecosystem for religious diversity and coexistence.

- Review and refine the National Unity Blueprint 2021-2030 and be more specific in deliverables concerning conflict resolution, minorities protection, the disincentivising and dismantling of (online) ecosystems that fuel religious animosity, and the improvement of minorities representation within the civil service.

The media

- Cultivate enough religious literacy to produce informed and nuanced reporting of religiously contentious affairs and not pander to a sense of 'faux centrism' that may end up with more platforming of right-wing figures.

EU Stakeholders

EU institutions/policymakers

- Foster capacity building, knowledge sharing, and partnership programmes so that Indonesian and Malaysian policymakers can benefit from the EU's longstanding experience in working with social media companies to tackle illegal hate speech.

- Develop an informed and sensitive foreign policy framework towards Indonesia that supports its promotion of religious moderation while being mindful that being seen as 'pro-Western' might stymie the progress of local civil society organisations.

European think tanks, academics, and universities

- Encourage the building of a more vibrant intellectual space in Malaysia by offering scholarships, collaborations, research funding, and other forms of academic partnerships.

About the GREASE Project

What can Europe learn from other parts of the world about governing religious diversity? The GREASE project has been finding out. Our consortium has brought together researchers and eminent scholars from Europe, South & Southeast Asia, Asia Pacific and the MENA region. Together we have investigated how religious diversity is governed in 24 countries. Comparing norms, laws and practices, we have sought to ascertain what is useful (or not useful) in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research has shed light on different societal approaches to accommodating religious minorities and migrants. GREASE aims to deepen our understanding of religious diversity governance, emphasizing insights for countering radicalisation.

The GREASE project is coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou and Dr. Tina Magazzini from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Lily Yakova from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Racius from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia).

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For more information on GREASE and to access resources produced as part of the project, visit the website: http://grease.eui.eu

This is part of the GREASE Policy Brief Series. Other briefs in the series include:

- Preventing Religiously Motivated Radicalisation: Lessons from Southeastern Europe
- The Power of Positive Connections: Western European Approaches to State-Religion Relations and Radicalisation
- Preventing Religiously Inspired Violent Radicalisation Among Moroccan Youth: Barriers and Opportunities

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