
MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN COEXISTENCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A Comparative Study of the Philippines and Indonesia

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Abstract: This article examines how historical power relations and state approaches to religious diversity shape Muslim–Christian coexistence in Southeast Asia. Positioned within scholarship on interfaith relations and peacebuilding, the study argues that colonial legacies, political governance, and institutional arrangements largely determine patterns of coexistence. Using a comparative qualitative approach, the paper analyzes interfaith relations in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and Indonesia through historical contextualization and institutional comparison. In the Southern Philippines, Islam existed as an established political and social order before Spanish and American colonization; however, colonial rule transformed religious identity into a marker of political domination and resistance. As a result, contemporary peacebuilding in BARMM emphasizes political autonomy and structural redress, while interfaith dialogue plays a secondary role. In contrast, Indonesia has developed a model of institutionalized religious pluralism grounded in the Pancasila ideology, constitutional frameworks, and formal interfaith bodies such as the *Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama* (FKUB). The findings indicate that durable interfaith coexistence depends on the alignment of historical justice, shared civic ideology, and sustained institutional dialogue.

Keywords: BARMM; FKUB; Philippines; Indonesia; Interfaith dialogue; Islam; Christianity.

Introduction

Muslim–Christian relations in the Southern Philippines represent a long-standing and contested aspect of Southeast Asian religious history. These relations have been shaped more by colonial rule, political marginalization, and processes of state formation than by theological difference. Accordingly, contemporary interfaith dynamics in Mindanao have a history of Muslim-Christian interaction dating back to the 13th-15th centuries, when these communities lived alongside each other. According to historians such as Cesar Abid Majul¹ and Najeeb M. Saleeby², Islam has penetrated the southern Philippines as early as the 13th century through Arab and Malay missionaries and traders. While Christianity arrived in 1520 CE through Spanish and Portuguese expeditions to Asia, the explorers called it “Hitherto terra incognita of Asia,” or “A land that had been unknown until now,” referring to territories that remained outside European knowledge until Europeans set foot there.³ Gospel, Gold, and Glory propelled the Spanish expedition, and the spread of Christianity (Gospel) and the extent of their imperial control (Glory) is what led them to a long series of battles against the Muslim Sultanates in the Southern Philippines that lasted for over 300 years and shaped the Muslim-Christian relation as confrontational.⁴ The prolonged Moro-Spanish wars deeply embedded religious differences to symbolize the resistance and colonial “othering”, an identity that portrayed the Muslims as hostile and rebellious.⁵ The division was further deepened by the centralization, land policies, and resettlement in Mindanao imposed by American colonial governance in 1912.⁶ This mass migration resulted in demographic change and structural marginalization that continued even after the Philippines

¹ Cesar Adib Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1999).

² Najeeb M. Saleeby, *The History of Sulu* (Manila: Bureau of Public Printing, 1908).

³ Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People*, 8th ed. (Quezon City: Garotech Publishing, 1990). <http://archive.org/details/historyoffilipin00teod>.

⁴ Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People*.

⁵ Jean-François Staszak, “Other/Otherness,” in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 2009), 43–47. <https://www.unige.ch/sciences-societe/geo/files/3214/4464/7634/OtherOtherness>.

⁶ Frederick L. Wernstedt and Paul D. Simkins, “Migrations and the Settlement of Mindanao,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 25, no. 1 (1965): 83–103. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2051042>.

‘independence in 1946, which contributed to the political unrest and the rise of Moro separatist movements.’⁷

Indonesia, on the other hand, has pursued an alternative approach to managing religious diversity; it articulated pluralism as a foundational national commitment in Pancasila and reinforced it with the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which translates to “Unity in Diversity.”⁸ While this belief emphasizes the supreme deity, it does not negate religious plurality; instead, it embeds religious freedom and social justice as its core principles. These commitments are reinforced by constitutional guarantees institutionalized in interfaith forums such as *Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama* (FKUB), *Mubammadiyah*, and *Nahdlatul Ulama*.⁹ These forums’ commitment to *wasatiyah* (moderation), social engagement, and sustained dialogue has been a key contributor to maintaining peace, coexistence, and respect within these diverse communities.¹⁰

Moreover, in the BARMM region, interreligious relations remain deeply influenced by the historical legacies of colonial violence, political marginalization, and land dispossession. Against this backdrop, the pursuit of political autonomy has emerged as a central strategy for addressing past injustices, reclaiming collective dignity, and reshaping the relationship between Muslim communities and the Philippine state. In Indonesia, however, religious diversity is integrated into its common national identity. Interfaith dialogue institutions reinforce this ideology and are actively participated in by religious civil society organizations, which enable issues or tensions between small communities be managed through sustained engagements.

This article is informed by the concept of “othering” as elaborated by Staszak (2008), which understands identity differences not as neutral cultural distinctions but as socially and politically constructed boundaries produced through historical power relations,

⁷ Harold M. Vinacke, “Post-War Government and Politics of the Philippines,” *The Journal of Politics* 9, no. 4 (November 1947): 717–30.

⁸ Patrick Greenwalt, *Indonesia’s Pancasila* (Washington, DC: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2021).

⁹ Windy Aprilia Dewi and Agus Widiyarta, “The Role of the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) in Providing Recommendations for the Establishment of Houses of Worship in the City of Surabaya,” *Jurnal Dialektika: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial* 23, no. 1 (2025): 436–44. <https://doi.org/10.63309/dialektika.v23i1.473>

¹⁰ Dewi and Widiyarta, “Role of the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB),” 436–44.

domination, and exclusion.¹¹ From this perspective, religious identities such as “Muslim” and “Christian” in both the Southern Philippines and Indonesia are not treated merely as theological categories, but as historically constructed social and political markers shaped by colonial encounters, state policies, and long-term conflict. This conceptual lens allows the study to analyze Muslim–Christian coexistence not simply as a matter of interfaith interaction, but as a product of historically structured processes of inclusion, exclusion, and institutional differentiation.

This research employs a qualitative comparative approach combining historical analysis and institutional comparison. The research is based on an analysis of secondary historical sources, legal documents, policy texts, and scholarly literature on Muslim–Christian relations in the Philippines and Indonesia. The two cases are selected because, while both are postcolonial and religiously plural societies, they represent different approaches to managing religious diversity: territorial autonomy and legal pluralism in the Bangsamoro region, and ideological-institutional pluralism in Indonesia. The comparison focuses on historical trajectories, governance arrangements, and the role of interfaith institutions in shaping patterns of coexistence. Rather than aiming at causal generalization, this study seeks to provide an analytically informed comparison that highlights how different political and institutional contexts influence interreligious relations.

Muslim and Christian Relations: A Historical Foundation

Islam first arrived in the Philippines in the thirteenth century through Arab and Malay missionaries and traders. Over time, the spread of Islam was strengthened by trade relations and intermarriage among local Filipinos.¹² Rather than military domination, the Islamization in the Philippines, particularly in Sulu and Mindanao, was done through trade networks and *da'wab*. These Malays, Arab traders, and missionaries not only introduced Islam and its teachings to the nation but also helped establish political and social institutions. In the mid-15th century, they established the Sultanate of Sulu and Mindanao, which shaped the local governance in the region. The

¹¹ Staszak, “Other/Otherness,” 43–47.

¹² Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*; Saleeby, *The History of Sulu*.

central figure in the establishment of these Sultanates was an Arab-Malay missionary named Sharif ul-Hashim (Sayyid Abu Bakr).¹³

Therefore, the idea that the Philippines was discovered by the West, in particular Spanish and Portuguese expeditioners, reflects a Eurocentric view that is historically misleading. Centuries before Europeans set foot in the Philippines, the islands were already inhabited by communities with established political structures, laws, customs, and trade relations with neighboring countries, including China, the Arab Peninsula, India, and the Malay Peninsula. Therefore, before the arrival of the Spanish expedition under Ferdinand Magellan, the Philippines was already an established community with its own system of leadership and social order. Neither Magellan nor Europeans discovered the Philippines, contrary to dominant European historical narratives. In the book *History of the Filipino People*, Teodoro Agoncillo emphasized the term “rediscovery” rather than “discovery” to describe the Spanish arrival in the Philippines in 1521, challenging European narratives that claimed they “discovered” the Philippines. He uses the term “rediscovery,” reframing the arrival of the Spanish expeditioners as an encounter between Europeans and the inhabitants of an established precolonial Philippine society.

In 15th century, Christianity arrived through Spanish expeditioners led by Ferdinand Magellan as part of the Iberian exploration of Asia which they described as, “*Hitherto terra incognita* or “A land that had been unknown until now” a term that described the Eurocentric worldview wherein, the territories outside Europe were considered unknown only because it is outside their imperial territory and they have no knowledge of the land. The European expansion in Southeast Asia was driven by three motives: “Gospel, Gold, Glory”. *Gospel*, referring to their desire to spread Christianity, *Gold* to secure wealth through natural resources and trading alliances, and lastly *Glory* to extend their imperial sovereignty. In the Muslim sultanate of the Philippines, this European expansion led to a long series of battles that tainted the Muslim-Christian relationship.¹⁴

Although in Luzon and the Visayas region, Christianity spread rapidly, while the attempt of the Spaniards to Christianize the Muslim population and bring them under colonial control was forcefully opposed, resulting in more than three centuries of battle known as the

¹³ Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*.

¹⁴ Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People*.

Spanish-Moro Wars.¹⁵ With the successful resistance of the Muslim inhabitants of Southern Philippines, the Spanish troops grew increasingly aggressive, strengthening their military campaigns and hardening colonial attitudes towards Muslim polities. They have reinforced the perception towards the Muslim inhabitants as “the other”, portraying them as inherently incompatible with Christianity. This divide resulted in Muslim-Christian relations that are shaped by warfare and the ensuing views of exclusion and distrust that made religious difference the defining feature of identity and opposition.¹⁶

The Muslim and Christian relations in the Southern part of the Philippines were shaped entirely by the Moro-Spanish war that lasted from 1565 to 1898, three hundred and thirty-three years of resistance. The Spanish labeled the Muslim Filipinos as Moros, which is a term used by Spain to associate with al-Andalus and their own *Reconquista* when Christianity reclaims glory against Muslims from North Africa that ruled them for roughly eight centuries.¹⁷ The word Moros or Moro carried a negative connotation, linking Muslim religious hostility, political resistance, and civilian threats. These ideas towards Muslims in the Philippines have embedded in the minds of Christians, lasting up to this day. They have reinforced the process of “othering” that made Christians form lasting hatred towards the Muslims. The Spanish-Moro conflict deepened the mistrust between Muslims and Christians. The colonial state at the time used the Christianized Filipinos from Luzon and Visayas to fight against the Muslims of the South, which only resulted in increased religious division. And as the war persisted, the Moros developed a perception of Christianity as a tool of colonial rule that lasted up to the modern day.

The American rule also influenced the Muslim and Christian relations in the Philippines. From 1898 to 1946, the American colonial government assumed control of policy and signed the “Bates Treaty of 1899” with the Sultans of Sulu, which recognized their

¹⁵ John Leddy Phelan, *The Hispanization of the Philippines: Spanish Aims and Filipino Responses, 1565–1700* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Vivienne S. M. Angeles, “Rethinking Encounters and Re-Imagining Muslim-Christian Relations in Post-Colonial Philippines,” in *500 Years of Christianity and the Global Filipino/a: Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Cristina Lledo Gomez, Agnes M. Brazal, and Ma. Marilou S. Ibita, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2024), 65–82. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47500-9_4.

¹⁷ Renato Constantino and Letizia R. Constantino, *The Philippines: A Past Revisited* (Quezon City: Tala Publishing Services, 1975).

authority and respected their customs and Islamic law. However, the policy was short-lived and was later replaced by a more comprehensive state intervention policy.¹⁸ By the early twentieth century, American rule had weakened the Moro Sultanates and subordinated Mindanao to centralized colonial control. They mandated a law enforcing Christians from Luzon and Visayas to move to the southern part of the Philippines, which is Mindanao, with a promise of better land.¹⁹ They establish policies for public education and land laws to reshape the region's social and demographic structure. One example of this is the opening of Cotabato and Lanao to settlers from Luzon and Visayas, which made the Muslim Filipinos the minority in their own ancestral lands.²⁰ The Americans labeled these mass migrations as development and modernization of the land; however, these policies only worsened the Muslim marginalization and intensified the Muslim-Christian rivalries for power and land. The American colonial period entrenched structural inequalities that later contributed to the rise of separatist movements.

After the Philippine independence in 1946, the state continued the American integration policies that promoted Christianity, a Manila-centered national identity that marginalized Moro histories.²¹ This resulted in many Muslim leaders viewing the state as a continuation of colonial domination rather than a neutral authority. In the year 1968, the Jabidah massacre happened, involving Muslim recruits who were allegedly killed by the government forces. This tragedy heightened Moro political awareness, leading to the formation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) under the leadership

¹⁸ Samuel K. Tan, *Internationalization of the Bangsamoro Struggle* (Quezon City: Center for Integrative and Development Studies, University of the Philippines, and University of the Philippines Press, 1993).

¹⁹ "Forced Conversion to Christianity in the Philippines. Spanish Colonial Period (1521–1898)," SinaunangPanahon.com, April 25, 2025. <http://www.sinaunangpanahon.com/forced-conversion-to-christianity-in-the-philippines/>.

²⁰ "Mindanao: Land of Promise (1999)," (accessed December 16, 2025). <https://www.c-r.org/accord/philippines%E2%80%93mindanao/mindanao-land-promise-1999>.

²¹ "The Philippines Gained Independence from the United States," (accessed July 2, 2021). <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/july-4-1946-philippines-independence>.

of Nur Misuari.²² According to some scholars, the post-colonial tension between the government and the Muslim Filipinos is best understood as the result of the historical marginalization, dispossession, exclusion, and unresolved colonial legacies. Islam and Christianity served less as theological differences and more as political identities shaped by long-standing power inequalities.

BARMM: Islamic Legal Frameworks and Regional Governance

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) represents a distinct form of subnational governance in Southeast Asia. Although it remained under the Philippines' secular constitution, some Islamic legal principles are incorporated into the regional and judicial frameworks, including family, personal, cultural, and economic laws. Under Republic Act No. 11054, the Bangsamoro Organic Law was enacted in 2019, which recognizes and addresses the grievances of the Moro people.²³ Before the BOL, the government and the Moro people, represented by the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, signed an earlier agreement. This agreement, however, is limited to the form of regional autonomy that resulted in dissatisfaction of the Moro people and the creation of a more inclusive agreement, which is the BOL, that constitutes an enhanced and asymmetric autonomy that emerged from the comprehensive peace agreement and seeks to address the long-standing political and historical grievances of the Moro people.²⁴

One of the most important aspects of BOL or BARMM governance is the inclusion of the Islamic justice system within its regional judiciary. Although its jurisdiction is limited to certain areas and applies only to Muslim residents of the BARMM, this recognition of shariah law has symbolic importance for the Moro people, as it

²² Maas Kalasanan, "The Jabidah Massacre of 1968," *mnlf.org.ph*, June 18, 2025. <http://www.mnlf.org.ph/index.php/the-mnlf/91-history/363-the-jabidah-massacre-of-1968>.

²³ Republic Act No. 11054, An Act Providing for the Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Repealing for the Purpose Republic Act No. 6734 and Republic Act No. 9054, (approved July 27, 2018); "Arellano Law Foundation," (accessed December 17, 2025). https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2018/ra_11054_2018.

²⁴ Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Republic Act No. 11054, (approved July 27, 2018), Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines: LawPhil, Arellano Law Foundation, (accessed December 17, 2025). https://legacy.senate.gov.ph/republic_acts/ra%2011054.

signals respect for Islamic traditions and signifies belonging to the BARMM. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Islamic legal system does not override the national law and is only applicable to the Muslim communities, and does not affect the non-Muslims in the BARMM.²⁵ At present, the regular court is actively coordinating with the sharia system to train the judicial court; this effort signifies that Islamic legal practice will be institutionalized in BARMM.²⁶ In this context, political sharia can be considered part of the Islamic legal and ethical principles in BARMM, without being part of the Philippine constitution. It is important to note that political sharia in BARMM only affects Muslim communities in the region and has limited jurisdiction according to the Republic Act no. 11054. This ethical grounding effectively enhances the credibility of autonomous governance by reflecting the values of Muslim communities and encouraging transparency, attention to public welfare, and, of course, social equity.²⁷ However, its application creates tension since it only safeguards Muslim identity, whereas the BARMM region has diverse religious and cultural practices.²⁸

In the autonomous region, interfaith relations are closely intertwined with the recognition of Islamic legal arrangements within the governance framework. The accommodation of sharia and Islamic governance reflects an effort to confront historical marginalization and political exclusion, and to address the underlying structural conditions that have shaped the long-standing conflict in the southern Philippines. The governance frameworks that draw on religious

²⁵ David G. Timberman and Yasmira Moner, *The Bangsamoro Transition Authority and the Forging of an Autonomous Regional Government in Muslim Mindanao: A Review of the Six-Year BARMM Transition* (Cotabato City: The Institute for Autonomy and Governance, 2025).
https://iag.org.ph/images/IAG_REPORT_July_2025_Review_of_BARMM_Transition.

²⁶ Bangsamoro Information Office, “BARMM Gov’t, Supreme Court Strengthen PH’s Shari’ah Justice System,” *Bangsamoro Official Website*, October 20, (2025).
<https://bangsamoro.gov.ph/news/latest-news/barmm-govt-supreme-court-strengthen-phs-shariah-justice-system/>.

²⁷ Bangsamoro Information Office, “BARMM Gov’t, Supreme Court Strengthen Shari’ah Justice System.”

²⁸ I. A. G. Philippines, “What Are the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the BOL?” *IAG*, n.d., (accessed December 19, 2025).
<https://www.iag.org.ph/index.php/editor-s-picks/1762-what-are-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples-in-the-bol>.

norms can, at times, raise questions among non-Muslim minorities about equal treatment and political voice. For BARMM, this means that clearly defined sharia jurisdiction must be accompanied by transparent institutions, inclusive participation, and sustained interfaith interaction if autonomy is to function effectively. Rather than serving as instruments of exclusion, Islamic legal provisions in this framework are designed to address post-conflict governance needs. Their legitimacy is grounded in constitutional compliance and in their role in strengthening trust among religious communities.

Pancasila and State Ideology

Religious diversity is explicitly acknowledged within Indonesia's foundational ideological framework. The nation's motto is *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), which reflects the idea that Indonesia's diverse ethnic and religious communities are central to its national identity.²⁹ On June 1st, 1945, the nationalist leader, Soekarno, stated in his speech that the state of Indonesia will be based on Pancasila (Five Principles) which are; (1) *Ketubanan yang Maha Esa* (belief in one supreme God); (2) *Kemanusiaan yang adil dan beradab* (Humanity); (3) *Persatuan Indonesia* (Nationality or unity of Indonesia); *Kerakyatan yang dipimpin oleh hikmat kebijaksanaan dalam permusyawaratan /perwakilan* (Democracy); (5) *Keadilan sosial bagi seluruh rakyat* (Social justice).

The first principle, *Ketubanan yang Maha Esa*, or Belief in one supreme God, is not entirely a Monotheistic statement; instead, the language was deliberately chosen to be neutral and more inclusive of all religions, and to avoid any tension between the Muslim majority and other minority groups.³⁰ Although the Indonesian Constitution is committed to monotheism, it also affirms a very general commitment to religious freedom. In Article 29 of the Legal Constitution, it declares the following: (1) the State of Indonesia shall be based on the belief in the One and Only God, and (2) the State guarantees that everyone has the right to freedom of worship.³¹

²⁹ Henry Thomas Simarmata et al., *Indonesia: Emerald Chain of Tolerance*, first edition (Jakarta: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Indonesia in cooperation with Center for Islam and State Studies, 2017).

³⁰ Paul Marshall, "Why Indonesian Islam Matters," *Oxford House Research*, June 13, (2023). <https://www.oxfordhousereseach.com/why-indonesian-islam-matters/>.

³¹ Marshall, "Why Indonesian Islam Matters."

Therefore, although the constitution affirms its belief in the divine power, it did not impose any religious system. In his article, Paul Marshall noted that the goal of the Indonesian constitution is to be sufficiently monotheistic to satisfy the majority Muslim population and sufficiently vague to avoid a restrictive state religion that would accommodate minority religious groups and create an inclusive civil religion. Many scholars view *Pancasila* as Indonesia's greatest asset, highlighting its tolerance, harmonious relations, and respect for the country's diverse religions. These values resonate strongly with the concept of *wasatiyah*, which is widely practiced in Indonesia. *Wasatiyah* is the principle of moderation, justice, and balance that promotes coexistence and discourages religious intolerance.³² The concept of *wasatiyah* has helped shape Indonesia's social and political culture, advancing the Pancasila goal of building a pluralistic and united nation in which people of different religious beliefs live together peacefully.

Interfaith Institutions: FKUB, Muhammadiyah, and Nahdlatul Ulama

Indonesia supports interfaith dialogue through government and non-government organizations. One important figure is the *Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama* (FKUB) or Forum for Religious Harmony. In Indonesia, all districts and provinces are required by the government to have an FKUB, and currently about 500 FKUBs operate nationwide. These forums are supported and funded by the government to maintain national harmony.³³ The FKUB serves as a consultative body that bridges local communities and the state. In every district, the forum brings together the heads of local religious groups, including Catholic, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist communities. The heads of these faith groups reflect the religious population in the area, and the FKUB helps mediate interreligious conflicts and provides advice and issues official statements on sensitive matters.³⁴

³² Muhammad Hanif Hassan, "Wasatiyyah as Explained by Prof. Muhammad Kamal Hassan: Justice, Excellence and Balance," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 6, no. 2 (2014): 24–30.

³³ "Indonesia Country Profile on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)," *Southeast Asia: Advancing Inter-Religious Dialogue and Freedom of Religion or Belief Project*, (2019). <https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/FoRB-Indonesia-2019>.

³⁴ "Indonesia Country Profile on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)."

Indonesia's second-largest non-government organization, Muhammadiyah, plays a constructive role in interfaith dialogue. This group was more engaged with non-Muslim social programs and immersion experiences, and also adopted a modernist approach. Its leaders frequently meet with Christian groups to coordinate peace efforts and relief. One major initiative is an agreement signed by the central leader of Muhammadiyah with the Catholic Sant'Egidio community to provide humanitarian aid during disasters and crises, thereby promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation.³⁵ Muhammadiyah places great importance on education, community services, and inclusive youth programs. These initiatives extend beyond Indonesia's borders; they have joined international interfaith groups, such as the International Contact Group for Bangsamoro, to facilitate and support dialogue between Muslims and Christians across countries.

Similarly, the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama, also supports pluralism. The head of the organization has consistently spoken about their disapproval of sectarian violence and their support for the *Pancasila* model.³⁶ Recently, the *Nahdlatul Ulama's* youth wing, Ansor, and senior clerics promoted a pluralistic, humanitarian understanding of Islam. In its statement, Nahdlatul Ulama encourages Muslims to embrace pluralism, social harmony, and tolerance as primary Islamic values.³⁷ For international observers, *Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama* played a vital role in keeping Indonesia's democracy and in promoting a tolerant and pluralistic understanding of Islam.³⁸ In conclusion, the major Islamic organizations in Indonesia uphold and strengthen the country's pluralistic system by working together to promote *wasatiyah* (moderation), coordinating with other faith-based communities on

³⁵ "Interfaith Cooperation: Muhammadiyah and Sant'Egidio Join Forces for Global Peace and Humanitarian Aid," *Muhammadiyah Official Website: English Version*, (accessed February 28, 2024). <https://en.muhammadiyah.or.id/interfaith-cooperation-muhammadiyah-and-santegidio-join-forces-for-global-peace-and-humanitarian-aid/>.

³⁶ "Reforming the Faith: Indonesia's Battle for the Soul of Islam," *CIRSD*, (accessed December 11, 2025). <http://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2019-issue-no-13/reforming-the-faith>.

³⁷ "Reforming the Faith – Indonesia's Battle for the Soul of Islam."

³⁸ Joe Cochrane, "Indonesians Seek to Export a Modernized Vision of Islam," *The New York Times*, May 1, (2017). <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/01/world/asia/indonesia-islam>.

shared social initiatives, and fostering unity among individuals to maintain peace.

Pluralism has been part of Indonesia's national identity; it is part of its state ideology (*Pancasila*), which provides the country with a broad framework for coexistence. Indonesia is proof that a constitutional commitment (Belief in One God and freedom of religion) and (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*) can help keep a united national identity despite religious differences.³⁹ In practice, *Pancasila* became a national consensus taught in schools and promoted in politics. This shared ideology continues to support tolerance amid the country's growing population.⁴⁰

The *Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama* and other organizations have facilitated a formal dialogue channel to provide a structured way for religious leaders to meet and discuss religious disputes. By reflecting the community's religious orientation, FKUB helps in ensuring peace among all religious groups.⁴¹ Similarly, some provincial and national interfaith committees organize initiatives that systematically teach dialogue skills. For instance, the FKUB was often called upon to help with local peace negotiations or to be consulted when new church buildings were built after a protest. In conclusion, these forums and organizations serve as a bridge to maintain the connection between the government and the grassroots.

However, despite its essential role in facilitating interreligious dialogue, the FKUB is not without limitations and criticisms. Scholars and civil society observers have noted that, in practice, the forum often operates within a bureaucratic, state-centered framework, which can constrain its independence and critical capacity. In some cases, FKUB has been criticized for functioning more as an instrument of conflict management and social control than as a genuine platform for equal deliberation, particularly in disputes over the construction of houses of worship, where minority groups may be structurally disadvantaged. Moreover, the composition of FKUB, which reflects existing religious demography and power relations, can reproduce majority dominance and limit the representation of smaller or marginalized religious communities. These challenges suggest that while FKUB contributes to stability and preventive dialogue, its

³⁹ Marshall, "Why Indonesian Islam Matters."

⁴⁰ Simarmata et al., *Indonesia – Emerald Chain of Tolerance*.

⁴¹ "Indonesia Country Profile on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)."

effectiveness in promoting substantive equality and justice among religious groups remains uneven and contingent on local political configurations and leadership.

Despite the challenges, giving authority to an influential Muslim organization helps shield society from extremism. In Indonesia, the leaders of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama consistently affirmed that nationalism and Islam are aligned. Their advocacy amplified a tolerant interpretation; Nahdlatul Ulama leaders urged their followers and Muslims worldwide to embrace pluralism, tolerance, and social harmony as the core of Islamic values.⁴² According to international observers of interfaith organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, these forums have helped reduce the influence of extremist movements and serve as a model for promoting pluralism. The pluralistic nature of Indonesia is grounded in its strong constitutional values, institutional structure, leadership, and popular participation. Pancasila, as a state ideology, provides a strong foundation for the unity of all religions and ethnic communities, reflecting and complementing Indonesia's diversity. Although the system still has many lapses, Indonesia shows that a Muslim-majority democratic society can manage religious plurality through careful collaborative governance.

Shared Patterns Between the Southern Philippines and Indonesia

Across Southeast Asia, patterns of religious pluralism have been shaped by different historical and institutional contexts. The BARMM and Indonesia illustrate contrasting ways of managing interreligious diversity, shaped by their respective histories, governance structures, approaches to dialogue, and experiences of conflict. This section is a comparative examination of four dimensions that are relevant to interfaith coexistence: 1) Shared patterns of Pluralism and Religious Coexistence, 2) Differences in governance structures and state ideology, 3) Factors contributing to the conflict and peacebuilding strategies, and 4) The effectiveness of dialogue institutions in the BARMM and Indonesia cases.

⁴² James M. Dorsey, "Reforming the Faith: Indonesia's Battle for the Soul of Islam," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* (CIRSD, Winter 2019). <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2019-issue-no-13/reforming-the-faith>.

1. *Shared Patterns of Pluralism and Religious Coexistence*

Indonesia and the Philippines both share a long history of religious pluralism shaped by sustained intercultural relations, social adaptation, and migration. In Indonesia, the state formally recognizes six religions and accommodates and respects their local customs and practices. Pluralism in Indonesia is grounded in its indigenous rich cultural values that emphasize shared humanity and mutual responsibility.⁴³ These cultural values function as a normative foundation for tolerance in a multi-religious setting. These values are maintained by local interfaith forums such as *Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama* (FKUB). FKUB brings together religious leaders, civil society actors, and government officials to support and sustain everyday coexistence and interfaith dialogue in Indonesian society.⁴⁴

In Mindanao, Pluralism predates the colonial division, with Islam arriving long before Spanish-imposed Christianity in the 15th century. These phenomena have produced a layered religious landscape where Muslim, Christian, and Indigenous people have coexisted in different forms of accommodation and negotiation. This historical encounter has shaped local norms of interreligious coexistence and negotiation, as seen in daily life, particularly in trade relations, intermarriage, and conflict-resolution practices within the Bangsamoro region. Although Southern Philippines and Indonesia were shaped by different colonial rule and have different religious and ethnic compositions, both areas have a long history of coexistence embedded in their daily lives. In this context, the long history of coexistence in both regions is essential in understanding how they manage conflict and sustain their peace.

2. *Differences in Governance Structures and State Ideology*

The differences between the Southern Philippines and Indonesia lie in their governance structures and state ideologies. In Indonesia, the state philosophy is *Pancasila*, which articulates the belief in one supreme God and the state's pluralistic commitment to democracy, unity, social justice, and humanity. In the context of the southern Philippines, it represents a unique, territorially defined form

⁴³ Theodorus Pangalila and Charstar A. Rumbay, "Multicultural Relation between Religious Communities in Indonesia," *HTS Theologise Studies/Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (2024): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9645>.

⁴⁴ Zainul Abas and Abdul Ghofur, "Maintaining Religious Harmony Through Collaboration Strategies," *Indonesian Journal of Islamic Literature and Muslim Society* 6, no. 2 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.22515/islimus.v6i2.5209>.

of autonomy within a secular unitary state. Although established under the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), BARMM was granted formal authority over political, personal, and family law, cultural affairs, and economic systems. These arrangements accommodate Islamic identity and the legal norms of the BARMM, despite the Philippines' secular nature. Rather than embracing pluralist ideology, BARMM is formulated in the Islamic tradition to address the historical marginalization and political exclusion of the Muslim communities in the Philippines for decades.

As a result, BARMM's governance structure is not defined by the state's ideology of pluralism but rather a more negotiated autonomy that recognizes religious identity both politically and in the legal framework.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Indonesia manages pluralism through a universal national ideology, *Pancasila*, that seeks to accommodate diversity across the entire nation. BARMM, on the other hand, adopts a localized, regionally defined accommodation of religious identity within a secular state framework. The differing views of BARMM and Indonesia have influenced the political landscape and significantly affected the institutionalization of interreligious dialogue and coexistence in their respective regions of the nation.

3. *Contributing Factors of the Conflict and Strategies for Peacebuilding*

The Philippines and Indonesia may have huge demographic and geographical differences, but both countries have experienced religiously framed conflict. In the Philippines, particularly the southern Philippines, the conflict is shaped by many factors such as long-standing colonial domination and the sustained resistance of the Moro people, political exclusion, land dispossession, and marginalization. The transition to peacebuilding under BARMM governance emphasizes political settlement and institutional reforms to address issues such as autonomous governance, justice reform, transitional mechanisms, and revenue sharing. Although primarily political and structural in nature, these frameworks have increasingly incorporated into community-based peacebuilding initiatives and interfaith engagements at the municipal and *barangay* (neighborhood) levels.

While in Indonesia, an example of an interreligious conflict is the Poso riot in 1998-2001. The events in Poso underscore how local political contestation, economic pressures, and the mobilization of

⁴⁵ *Republic Act*, no. 11054.

religious identity can intensify into prolonged interreligious violence. Following repeated clashes between Muslim and Christian communities, the conflict was ultimately addressed through the Malino Declaration, a negotiated agreement that prioritized reconciliation and dialogue at the community level.⁴⁶ In Indonesia, local conflicts often take shape when structural pressures intersect with disputes over land, contests for political patronage, and uneven socioeconomic conditions. Research highlights the need for preventive dialogue, educational initiatives promoting religious moderation, and ongoing community participation to mitigate these tensions.⁴⁷ Thus, Indonesia emphasizes institutionalized dialogue and civil society-led moderation within a national pluralistic framework. In contrast, peacebuilding in BARMM prioritizes political settlement and structural reforms as the main foundations of peace, with interfaith engagement serving as a complementary socio-cultural role.

4. *The Effectiveness of Dialogue Institutions in BARMM and FKUB*

Its legitimacy and institutional support can be used to measure the effectiveness of a dialogue institution. The FKUB in Indonesia acts as a mediator, preventing local tensions and facilitating preventive dialogue to reduce the risk of violence.⁴⁸ Scholarly work shows that forums like these facilitate continuous interaction between religious communities and government institutions, reinforcing patterns of coexistence and tolerance in local settings.⁴⁹ Moreover, Initiatives led by young people across faith lines show how grassroots actors contribute to interreligious harmony beyond formal institutions, particularly when dialogue efforts intersect with civic action and cross-community participation.⁵⁰ Unlike more established

⁴⁶ “Malino Declaration: Signed by the Two Warring Parties to End Conflict and Create Peace in Poso, Central Sulawesi,” (Jakarta: Government of the Republic of Indonesia, December 20, 2001), (accessed December 11, 2025). <http://www.peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/id011220malino20declaration>.

⁴⁷ Mirsel Robertus, Felix Baghi, and Puplius M. Buru, “Building Peace through Social Capital: Preventing Religious Intolerance in Manggarai, Indonesia,” *Muharrrik: Jurnal Dakwah dan Sosial* 8, no. 2 (2025): 67–80.

⁴⁸ Dewi and Widiyarta, “Role of the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB),” 436–44.

⁴⁹ Abas and Ghofur, “Maintaining Religious Harmony Through Collaboration Strategies.”

⁵⁰ Anisa Eka Putri Kusmayani, “Youth Interfaith Dialogue in Everyday Citizenship in Indonesia: Bridging Religious Diversity and Citizenship Challenges,” *FOCUS* 4, no. 2 (2023): 159–68. <https://doi.org/10.26593/focus.v4i2.7375>.

models, the dialogue landscape in BARMM is still taking shape and is increasingly oriented toward inclusive peacebuilding rather than formal institutional arrangements.⁵¹ Numerous interfaith and community-based initiatives have supported social cohesion. Still, their success is shaped by the capacity of state institutions, minority representation, and their incorporation into formal regional policy structures.⁵²

However, the BARMM context enables locally rooted forms of interfaith engagement, yet faces limitations in developing durable, fully institutionalized dialogue mechanisms comparable to Indonesia's FKUB system. In this case, the comparison shows that Indonesia and the Southern Philippines share underlying traditions of plural coexistence but differ significantly in their experiences of state formation, conflict, and institutional development. Indonesia illustrates the capacity of a national pluralist framework and formal dialogue mechanisms to sustain interfaith engagement across a diverse polity. In contrast, the Southern Philippines emphasizes the role of autonomy and structural reform in peacebuilding, complemented by socio-cultural initiatives. Analysis of these contrasting configurations illuminates how plural societies address diversity and cultivate coexistence, thereby contributing to both academic inquiry and policy discussions in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that Muslim–Christian relations in the Philippines and Indonesia cannot be explained solely by theological differences. Instead, these relations have been shaped by historical configurations of power, colonial encounters, and state policies toward religious diversity.

In the Philippines, Islam had already developed into an organized social and political order well before Europeans arrived. Under Spanish and later American colonial rule, Islamic polities were gradually dismantled through military campaigns, demographic reordering, and the imposition of centralized administrative systems. These processes recast religious difference into a political marker of

⁵¹ Mella Bernabe, "Faith and Civic Leaders Unite for Peaceful Credible 2025 BARMM Elections," *PeaceGovPH*, August 7, (2025). <https://peace.gov.ph/2025/08/faith-and-civic-leaders-unite-for-peaceful-credible-2025-barmm-elections>.

⁵² I. A. G. Philippines, "Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the BOL."

exclusion. As a result, Christianity became closely associated with colonial authority, while Islam increasingly functioned as a source of resistance. Hence, the Moro struggle is better understood not as a religious conflict, but as a historically grounded contest over land, political recognition, and self-determination. These dynamics continued to influence both postcolonial and contemporary relations in the country. By contrast, Indonesia offers different approaches, as religious diversity is embedded in its foundational ideology, *Pancasila*. Pluralism in Indonesia functions as a shared civic value, reinforced by constitutional arrangements and institutional practices in education and governance that integrate religious difference into a broader national identity. The FKUB, *Muhammadiyah*, and Nahdlatul Ulama served to maintain pluralism by connecting the state to communities. These actors operationalized pluralist principles through ongoing dialogue and mediation at the community level.

This research shows that enduring interfaith coexistence depends on the alignment of justice-oriented structures, legitimizing ideas, and capable institutions. In Indonesia, interfaith dialogue benefits from a widely shared national ideology that embraces pluralism and affirms the Oneness of God, as well as from the moral credibility of religious civil society organizations. In contrast, peacebuilding in the Philippines, particularly in BARMM, has prioritized political compromise, the correction of historical exclusion and marginalization, and autonomy arrangements, alongside legal pluralism and governance reforms. These form the core of this process, with interfaith dialogue operating alongside them rather than as a fully institutionalized framework. This study shows that interfaith peace is not produced by diversity or dialogue alone, but by governance arrangements that are grounded in history, supported by institutions, and open to political inclusion.

Furthermore, this study also contributes to the broader discussion on interfaith relations in Southeast Asia by showing that historical trajectories and governance choices profoundly shape religious coexistence. By comparing the cases of BARMM and Indonesia, the article highlights how different institutional pathways—autonomy-based governance and ideology-based pluralism—produce distinct patterns of managing religious diversity. These findings suggest that sustainable interfaith coexistence depends

not only on dialogue but also on political arrangements and institutions that address historical grievances and promote inclusion.

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