Identity Politics and Religions: The Detrimental Effects on The ASEAN Regional Stability

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ABSTRACT

Identity politics and religion pose significant challenges for many countries in Southeast Asia, potentially threatening regional stability. Despite this, there has been limited research exploring their impact on regional stability in ASEAN countries. A recent study aimed to analyze the influence of identity politics and religion in ASEAN member countries, particularly those with democratic systems such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand, from 2020 to 2024. The research used a descriptive qualitative approach, examining annual reports on freedom of religion and belief, domestic political and economic dynamics, as well as previous and current literature on political, economic, and social dynamics in the region. The analysis revealed that Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand are experiencing domestic instability, partly due to identity politics and religion. The research found that the majority ethnic or religious groups dominate identity and religious politics with support from the government and political elites, leading to regional instability within ASEAN member countries. Additionally, it was noted that national regulations need updating, particularly regarding equality and justice for minority groups and the mass media, to address the suppression of identity politics and religion in democratic systems.

Keywords: Identity politics and Religion, Regional Stability, ASEAN Country Members, equality, justice, National Regulations.

I. Introduction

ASEAN member countries encompass a wide range of political systems, including democracy, single-party rule, and absolute monarchy. However, this diversity does not impede cooperation among member countries.(C. Thompson & Sunchindah, 2023). ASEAN serves as a platform for its members to engage in collaborative efforts to address a multitude of issues, encompassing political, economic, and socio-cultural domains.(Acharya, 1997; J. C. Velasco, 2023).

ASEAN upholds the principle of non-intervention, respecting the domestic affairs of its member countries.(Seah, 2023). However, this does not hinder them from forming joint agreements to ensure regional stability. In the political arena, especially during general elections, ASEAN actively promotes peaceful and fair democratic processes through forums such as the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Foreign Ministerial Meetings (AMM) (Müller, 2023), and ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR).(ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), 2013). These platforms foster knowledge-sharing and best practices in organizing general elections and contribute to strengthening democratic institutions in member countries. Furthermore, through collaboration with international organizations, ASEAN advocates for transparent election observation to safeguard the credibility and integrity of the electoral process.(ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), 2023).

Despite the presence of non-democratic member countries, ASEAN remains committed to promoting democratic values and human rights through dialogue and diplomacy. It has successfully fostered close cooperation on political issues, emphasizing good governance and transparency through joint declarations and statements. Additionally, ASEAN has effectively mediated political tensions to maintain regional stability, showing its commitment to peace. (Rattanasevee, 2023). This exemplifies that diverse political systems do not hinder effective cooperation within ASEAN, including in managing general elections. Through this approach, ASEAN has effectively proven that the diversity of political systems is not a barrier to successful and harmonious cooperation in dealing with political issues.

Currently, multiple ASEAN member countries are grappling with conflict and instability stemming from the surge of identity politics and religious influence within the political sphere. In Indonesia, there has been a recurring prevalence of populist movements championing specific identities, including religion, from 2019 to 2024. While these movements have decreased in activity in 2024, the narratives of identity politics persist in public discourse.(Nuryanti, 2020; Yilmaz et al., 2022). Thailand is encountering a parallel situation,

characterized by heightened tensions between the royal-supported government and Muslim separatist factions in southern Thailand. Notably, there is a growing concern over the involvement of Buddhist religious leaders who are endorsing the Thai military's actions to quell Muslim community groups in the region.(Ockey, 2021; Pherali, 2023).

In present-day Malaysia, tensions are simmering between the ethnic Malay-Muslim majority and the minority Chinese and Indian groups. The upcoming 2022 elections will place a spotlight on Malay privilege and affirmative action policies, with several candidate pairs making these issues a focal point of their political campaigns.(Aminnuddin, 2020; Chin, 2022). Meanwhile, in the Philippines, political stability and progress are at risk due to the conflict between Muslim separatist groups in Mindanao and the Philippine government. This conflict has taken center stage in political campaigns and the current domestic political landscape. Both national and international attention is now honing in on the influence of the Catholic Church, which has taken a non-neutral stance in the 2022 Philippine elections.(Rabasa & Chalk, 2001; Ramakrishna et al., 2023).

Singapore is facing new challenges as the issues of identity politics and religion are gaining prominence.(R. G. Tan, 2023). The country is increasingly concerned about the rise of identity politics movements similar to those seen in neighboring countries. Identity politics and religion have become pressing concerns in ASEAN countries. (Taylor & Yapp, 2024). This article examines the impact of these phenomena on regional stability, particularly within ASEAN. The research focuses on ASEAN countries with democratic systems from 2020 to 2024, using a qualitative approach that analyzes meeting reports, scientific journals, annual reports on religious freedom, democratic dynamics in Southeast Asian countries, and media responses.

The conflicts in Southeast Asia have led to divisions among several ASEAN member countries, posing a major concern for the government. These divisions stem from identity issues such as ethnicity and religion, which are viewed as significant threats. The situation is further exacerbated by politicians who exploit ethnic and religious identities for their own political interests.(Tudor &

Slater, 2021). Moreover, the recent surge in populism based on ethnic or religious identity has presented a substantial challenge to national stability in ASEAN countries.(Robison & Hadiz, 2020; Wicaksana & Wardhana, 2021) Fenomena populis ini diyakini berasal dari gerakan politik di Barat, seperti yang terlihat di Inggris dan Amerika Serikat.(Phùng & Nguyễn, 2022; A. Velasco & Bucelli, 2022). This populist trend is believed to have originated from political movements in the West, akin to those in the United Kingdom and the United States. These issues give rise to complex political and security challenges for ASEAN. As a regional organization in Southeast Asia, it is imperative for ASEAN to strike a balance between its established regional norms and practices while demonstrating responsiveness and efficacy in addressing the diverse problems faced by its member countries.(Caballero-Anthony, 2023).

II. Discussion

a. Religiosity and Rhetoric: The Role of Religion in Political Campaigns

Throughout the 1980s, religious practices from Islamic fundamentalism to Catholic liberation theology began to extend beyond the private sphere and actively engage in public life.(Herbert, 2017). This significant shift has led to the "deprivatization" of religion in modern times, with religious institutions now not only focusing on personal assistance, but also actively challenging political and social forces.(Hjelm, 2014). In his book "Public Religions in the Modern World," Casanova emphasizes the crucial global role of religions in areas such as peace, conflict, human rights, social justice, and the environment.(Casanova, 2011). In a political context, religion is not merely an identity factor or a mobilization tool, but a force that actively shapes the political agenda and decision-making process.(Wald et al., 2005). This contemporary presence of religion in the public sphere not only reflects individual values but also comprehensively influences political dynamics. For Troeltsch, religion is not confined to a personal belief system; it is a social force that significantly influences political dynamics in modern society.(Chung, 2019). Religion can provide a robust moral foundation for political action and play a pivotal role in mass mobilization and the formation of political identity.

In today's modern democracy, religion plays an increasingly significant role in shaping political life within the public sphere. As countries with a religious majority turn toward elections, religion becomes a crucial tool for garnering support.(Philpott, 2007). Political parties and aspiring leaders often seek to align themselves with religious identities in order to win favor and endorsement from religious communities.(Halev, 2003; Haynes, 2023; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021). Beyond this, religion serves to fortify political identity and solidarity among voters, thereby fostering stronger bonds within the community.(Azwar & Muliono, 2022; Nelson, 2021; Schumacher, 2023). In Thailand, where the majority of the population adheres to Theravada Buddhism, politics has emerged as a space for politicians to accrue benefits. Many politicians endeavor to forge connections with the Sangha Council, and the robust relationships between politicians and Buddhist monks and spiritual leaders are rooted in the pursuit of moral and religious backing.(Buaban, 2021). The reciprocity extended by politicians to Buddhist religious leaders is manifested through supporting numerous initiatives of the Sangha Council or local Buddhist religious leaders in Thailand, despite the discriminatory nature of these actions.(Boonjubun et al., 2021).

Political platforms are often crafted around religious values to resonate with voters who hold strong religious convictions.(Kofi Frimpong et al., 2022; Marcinkiewicz & Dassonneville, 2022). In Indonesia, a country with a predominantly Muslim population, Islam wields substantial influence in its political landscape.(Alvian & Ardhani, 2023). Politicians leverage religious values to garner support from Muslims, championing their religious identities and pledging to uphold Islamic principles in various public policies.(Widian et al., 2023). Moreover, Indonesian politicians utilize religious rhetoric in their campaign speeches to attract voters across religious spectrums, addressing pertinent issues of social justice and morality, while placing Islam at the forefront of governmental priorities.(Ahmad, 2022). These politicians strategically collaborate with religious leaders, such as ulama, to secure support and legitimacy within the religious community.

In the Philippines, a parallel phenomenon is evident, where the Catholic majority exerts substantial influence over public life and politics.(Cornelio & Aldama, 2020; Haynes, 2023). Filipino politicians prioritize Catholic religious activities and leverage their support by demonstrating genuine concern for religious life. Moreover, many politicians in the Philippines cultivate close ties to bishops and leaders of the Catholic Church, cementing the interconnection between religion and politics in the country.(Batalla & Baring, 2019; Bautista, 2020; Buckley et al., 2022)

In the development of public policy, religion wields significant influence in shaping the direction of governments and politicians. Issues such as religious education in schools, protection of religious freedom, and backing for religious organizations form crucial components of the political agenda. Candidates and political parties often exploit their positions on these matters to secure support from religious groups and manipulate public policy pertaining to these religions.(Albright, 2006; Baxter, 2020). Malaysia and Indonesia host the two largest Muslim populations among ASEAN member countries. Consequently, many public policies in these nations tend to cater to the needs of a specific religious group. (Nurozi, 2022) In Malaysia, the government incorporates sharia law into policies with Islamic religious influences, particularly in family law and criminal legislation.(Ali, 2022; Latiff & Azhar, 2024). In Indonesia, despite the absence of sharia law regulations in the 1945 Law, one province, Aceh, is legally permitted to enforce sharia law, covering criminal law, marriage, inheritance, as well as public dress codes and etiquette.(Shadiqin & Srimulyani, 2022)

Harnessing religious narratives in political campaigns proves to be a powerful tactic in nations with a significant religious majority.(Gentile, 2020; Wibisono, 2018; Wuthnow, 2023). Take Indonesia, for example, where most of the population is Muslim. Here, politicians adeptly utilize their religious identity to secure backing from the Muslim community. Through active participation in religious events, impassioned speeches highlighting Islamic principles, and promises of pro-Islamic policies, they effectively earn the trust and support of conservative Muslim voters.

In Thailand, the profound influence of Theravada Buddhism permeates politics and culture. Evidenced by politicians visiting Buddhist temples and utilizing Buddhist holiday celebrations to promote their political agendas, the integration of Buddhist moral principles such as karma and wisdom serves to align their self-image and values with those of traditional Buddhism.(Keyes, 1989; Larsson, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2023). A similar scenario unfolds in Malaysia, where Islam holds the status of the official state religion and sharia law is practiced in multiple states.(Abdullah, 2021; Rachman, 2024; Shukri, 2023). Politicians frequently leverage Islamic religious platforms in their campaigns, vowing support for the implementation of sharia law and advocating for Islamic education in schools to secure backing from the Muslim majority. Conversely, in the predominantly Roman Catholic Philippines, Catholicism exerts a strong influence over society. Politicians often deploy Catholic religious rhetoric to advocate for policies that resonate with the moral perspectives of the Catholic Church on sensitive issues such as abortion, birth control, and LGBT rights. Religious language in political campaigns has the power to sway election outcomes by rallying a fervent voter base with strong religious ties, fortifying political allegiance, and shaping post-election policy initiatives. Nonetheless, this strategy could exacerbate social divisions among religious groups and pose a challenge to the concept of secularism in governance.

b. **Political Dynamics and Regional Stability: Case Studies in ASEAN member countries**

The political stability in the ASEAN region has undergone significant changes from 2020 to 2024. Some countries experienced increased instability, while others managed to maintain or improve their political stability. Factors such as the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic conditions, social tensions, identity politics, and demands for political reform play an important role in determining the level of political stability in each country. An example of increasing instability can be observed in Myanmar. The country experienced a severe political crisis after the general elections in November 2020, followed by a military coup in February 2021, triggering mass protests, military crackdowns, and armed conflict involving various ethnic and anti-ethnic

groups.(Kipgen, 2021; Thawnghmung & Noah, 2021; Yamahata & Anderson, 2022). This instability has not only shaken Myanmar but also had a significant impact on regional stability, especially with refugee flows and widespread humanitarian crises. (David et al., 2022)

Thailand has been rocked by a surge of pro-democracy protests spearheaded by students since mid-2020. These demonstrators are calling for reforms within the monarchy, the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, and changes to the constitution.(Bünte, 2023; Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2020). The government's crackdown on these protests has only exacerbated tensions and raised serious doubts about the country's political stability.(Basri & Hill, 2020; Mietzner, 2021). Meanwhile, Malaysia is facing significant political instability, characterized by frequent changes in government since the 2018 election.(Tayeb, 2021). In 2020, the Perikatan Nasional coalition replaced the Pakatan Harapan government, further exacerbating the ongoing political crisis.(Hutchinson, 2023; Ufen, 2021) This instability has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a rise in public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the crisis.(Mohamed Noor, 2022).

The political stability in Singapore has been highlighted, but there are indications of underlying political issues. Recent findings suggest that domestic political conditions in Singapore have not placed sufficient emphasis on human rights. According to the report by Freedom House, Singapore scored 47 out of 100, signaling areas of improvement, with Political Rights at 19 out of 40 and Civil Liberties at 28 out of 60.(Freedom House, 2023a, 2023b). Moreover, the 2020 election victory of the People's Action Party (PAP) was shadowed by evidence of fraud. (N. Tan & Preece, 2024). including a biased pro-government media, the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system, financial candidacy barriers, and legal constraints on freedom of expression.(ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR), 2020; Kwan, 2022; Oliver & Ostwald, 2020).

Identity politics and religion wield significant influence over elections in many countries, including those within ASEAN. These influential elements are pivotal to political stability on both national and regional scales. Many

politicians in ASEAN strategically utilize identity politics to rally support. While this tactic can bolster the government's legitimacy among specific groups, it can also alienate and discriminate against others. Internal conflicts stemming from identity politics and religion further destabilize ASEAN. For instance, the enduring conflict in Mindanao, Philippines, where the Muslim population is prevalent, poses a formidable challenge to both national and regional stability. Despite the establishment of Bangsamoro Autonomy to promote peace, sporadic tensions, and conflicts continued to disrupt ASEAN regional security from 2020 to 2024 (International Crisis Group, 2023; Perez, 2021; Söderberg Kovacs et al., 2021). ASEAN endeavors to tackle issues related to identity politics and religion through various initiatives and frameworks. One such effort is the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), which strives to champion and safeguard human rights in the region. Nevertheless, ASEAN's principle of non-intervention often complicates the effective management of these sensitive matters.

The myriad factors affecting political stability in ASEAN present a complex landscape, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This global crisis not only imperils public health but also wields a profound impact on the political equilibrium of numerous ASEAN nations. (Suriyankietkaew & Nimsai, 2021). Swift and adept responses to the pandemic have proven pivotal in upholding political stability. Conversely, nations that have grappled with ineffective pandemic management are witnessing a surge in public discontent that imperils their political stability. (An & Tang, 2020; Rüland, 2021; Turner et al., 2022).

The political landscape in ASEAN is being significantly influenced by the economic downturn resulting from the pandemic. (Amul et al., 2022; Arnakim & Kibtiah, 2021). Rising poverty levels, economic hardships, and discontent with government economic policies are complicating the political environment. (ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK, 2022; ERIA, 2021). Marginalized communities often resort to violence and demand change, leading to increased social and political tensions. (Banyan, 2020; Muhibat, 2020). Additionally, there is a growing demand for political reform and greater democracy in several ASEAN

countries, which is playing a pivotal role in shaping regional political dynamics.(Rodan & Baker, 2020). Citizens are increasingly aware of their political rights, yet they face governments that are resistant to change. These conditions give rise to tensions between the government and society, exemplified in ongoing protests in Thailand where students and pro-democracy groups are advocating for substantial changes in the political system.

In the face of these challenges, ASEAN countries are adopting diverse strategies to navigate the situation. Some nations have successfully maintained stability through inclusive policies and effective crisis management, while others are still striving to balance diverse societal interests amidst increasingly complex political and social demands. Cooperation in countering terrorism and extremism is also influenced by religious sentiment and identity. ASEAN countries are actively working to bolster collaboration in addressing the threat of terrorism, often rooted in identity politics and religion. Nevertheless, divergent approaches and priorities among member countries can pose a challenge to achieving effective cooperation.

c. **The Influence of Identity Politics on Social Divisions in ASEAN Member Countries**

The concept of identity politics revolves around groups of individuals uniting based on factors such as ethnicity, religion, and gender (Stout, 2020) to advocate for their interests in the political sphere.(Pérez, 2021). It emphasizes the crucial role of identity in shaping political consciousness and decision-making. Identity politics stems from the imperative to recognize and rectify the injustices faced by these groups, often stemming from a legacy of oppression and marginalization.

In contemporary Southeast Asia, identity politics stands as a multifaceted phenomenon. It involves the prioritization of group identities such as ethnicity, religion, and culture to shape public opinion and garner political support.(Mietzner, 2021). An evident consequence of identity politics is the growing marginalization of ethnic minorities, while the majority group gains increasing leverage, especially in the political sphere.(Mietzner, 2020). Nevertheless, postcolonial states in the region are encumbered by exclusive

national narratives that fail to acknowledge the fluid and intricate nature of Southeast Asian identities, marked by constant movement and complexity.(Ismail, 2016). Striking a balance between recognizing diverse identities and fostering unity is imperative in averting polarization and conflict, and in fostering inclusive discourse and political stability across the region.(Croissant, 2021; Rozman, 2021; Takeda, 2021; Zapata-Barrero & Mansouri, 2022).

As the most populous country in ASEAN, Indonesia boasts a rich tapestry of ethnic and religious diversity. However, identity politics often engenders tensions between the Muslim majority and other groups, including Christians, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, and local faith traditions. From 2020 to 2024, and following the 2019 general election until the 2024 general election, identity politics continued to pervade public discourse. One striking example is the Islamic populist movement, which has catalyzed political, economic, and social unrest in Indonesia. Furthermore, this has led to a troubling surge in intolerance, with minority groups bearing the brunt of these divisive dynamics.(Arifianto, 2020; Hadiz, 2016; Muhtadi & Muslim, 2021; Yilmaz & Barton, 2021)

Like Indonesia, other Southeast Asian countries grapple with the complexity of identity politics. In Malaysia, ethnic relations between Malays, Chinese, and Indians heavily influence politics, with affirmative action policies favoring Bumiputeras causing tension with other ethnic groups.(Reddy & Selvanathan, 2020; C.-B. Tan, 2023; Welsh, 2020). Thailand, once a monarchy, has been transitioning toward a democratic system since the 1932 Siamese Revolution.(de Lapomarede, 1934). However, recent years have seen an increase in government control, violating national political ethics.(Connors, 2023; Subrahmanyan, 2024). In addition, ethnic and religious conflicts in southern provinces, where Malay Muslims are in the majority (Mishra, 2023; Rackett, 2014), are perceived as a struggle for identity against the predominantly Buddhist and ethnically Thai central government, supported by royalist and Buddhist groups.

The situation in Myanmar has remained unstable due to the Rohingya conflict since the end of 2017. The Burmese Nationalist group plays a significant role in this conflict, viewing the Rohingya group as a threat because it does not align with their identity as a Buddhist country.(Akins, 2018; Roy Chowdhury, 2020; Simpson & Farrelly, 2020). This conflict is a clear example of identity politics rooted in ethnic and religious discrimination. The USDP Party and other nationalist political parties are using anti-Rohingya rhetoric to gain support from the dominant Burmese ethnic group. The government's oppression of both the Rohingya and the Buddhist-majority population has attracted international attention.(Gravers, 2021; Justice For Myanmar, 2020).

The influence of identity-based politics on social and political dynamics within ASEAN member countries cannot be underestimated. The diverse cultures, languages, and beliefs within the region are significantly impacted by this form of politics. While identity politics can enhance group awareness and representation, it also carries the potential to provoke social conflicts. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, and the Philippines within ASEAN recognize the profound influence of political identity on their social structure, particularly as they navigate religious and ethnic diversity, which often results in conflict.

The findings of this study emphasize the detrimental effects of identity politics, which often results in division between majority and minority groups. In Malaysia and Myanmar, policies favoring the majority have led to feelings of injustice and discrimination among minorities. Furthermore, identity politics has been a driving force behind ethnic and religious conflicts, such as those observed in Southern Thailand and the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, revealing the pivotal role of identity in inciting violence.

Moreover, when identity politics is exploited for political gain, it inevitably fuels societal divisions. For instance, Indonesia faced religious disharmony during 2016–2019 and 2020–2024, characterized by numerous violations of freedom of religion and belief (Bagir et al., 2020; Bielefeldt et al., 2022) primarily attributed to conservative Muslim communities.(Wahid et al., 2023). Politicians have capitalized on this situation for their own political advantage,

exacerbating polarization and societal divisions.(Koorag, 2023; Zinira, 2023). Consequently, this exploitation has substantially eroded trust between religious and ethnic groups, impeding cooperation, social cohesion, and the progress toward a harmonious society.

To address the detrimental effects of identity politics, ASEAN member countries need to embrace several crucial integrated strategies. Firstly, inclusive policies must become a top governmental priority, ensuring that all identity groups are esteemed and have equal rights without prejudice. This necessitates enacting laws that protect the rights of minorities and promote their active engagement in various facets of public life. Secondly, fostering dialogue among ethnic and religious groups is paramount in mitigating tensions, nurturing understanding, and fostering trust between communities. This dialogue can be facilitated through community forums, cultural exchange programs, and interfaith initiatives that bring together leaders and community members from diverse backgrounds.

Thirdly, there needs to be a methodical increase in education and awareness about diversity and tolerance. Educational curricula should incorporate material on the importance of pluralism, tolerance, and respect for differences, while public campaigns can be utilized to diminish prejudice and discrimination. Lastly, fair and impartial law enforcement is critical in preventing identity-based discrimination and violence. Law enforcement officials must be adeptly trained to handle cases of discrimination sensitively and decisively, and the justice system must ensure that violations of identity rights are duly addressed. It is envisioned that these strategies will lead to the creation of a more inclusive and harmonious social environment in ASEAN member countries, while also working to reduce the social divisions caused by identity politics.

d. **Political Participation and Minority Representation: Policy Implications and Practice**

One of the key factors in achieving stability is the representation of minority groups. It is vital to ensure that religious and ethnic minorities are fairly represented in the political sphere, as this has a positive impact on the stability

of the ASEAN region. Their presence in political and government institutions promotes social justice and inclusivity, which in turn reduces social tensions and contributes to political stability.(Bracic, 2020, 2022; Hartoyo et al., 2020). Additionally, a strong and diverse representation in government enhances its legitimacy and its capacity to effectively manage crises, thereby laying a solid foundation for long-term stability.

Embracing fair and inclusive representation is crucial for easing tensions between ethnic and religious groups. When minority groups are adequately represented and safeguarded in political structures, it paves the way for improved dialogue between different groups. Understanding and collaboration across ethnic and religious lines serve to prevent conflicts that could destabilize the region. Engaging minority groups in the political process ensures that public policies are more attuned to their needs and aspirations. This not only fosters sustainable development but also fosters stable and equitable socio-economic conditions throughout the ASEAN region.

On a regional scale, fair representation of religious and ethnic minority groups in politics serves as a potent driver for promoting peace and stability. Nations that effectively manage internal diversity tend to be more politically stable, thereby reducing the potential for interstate conflicts and fostering regional cooperation on critical strategic matters. Take Malaysia for example, where the government system has made efforts to mirror significant ethnic diversity, including Malays, Chinese, and Indians, in its political framework. While challenges persist, this approach has significantly helped to diffuse potential ethnic tensions. Similarly, Singapore's inclusive approach to its religiously and ethnically diverse society has played a pivotal role in ensuring long-term social and political stability.

Throughout the 2020-2024 period, ASEAN member countries have proactively implemented a variety of measures to effectively address tensions arising from identity politics and religion.(Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia, 2023). Through the use of dialogue and mediation, ASEAN has successfully managed political tensions related to identity and religious issues. Governments have

proactively facilitated dialogue among diverse societal groups, striving to reach agreements or compromises that reduce conflict. Furthermore, member countries in ASEAN are fully committed to objectively enforcing the law for all citizens, irrespective of their identity or religion. This commitment is aimed at ensuring that every citizen feels secure under the law and receives fair treatment from legal institutions.

Some countries, such as Singapore and Malaysia, are at the forefront of promoting interfaith and intergroup tolerance. By implementing robust educational programs on multiculturalism and interreligious dialogue, they aim to foster a deep understanding and profound appreciation of cultural and religious diversity in society.(Awang et al., 2022; Kong & Woods, 2020). Indonesia firmly upholds the freedom of all civil society to actively engage in the political realm, as articulated in Law Number 40 of 2008 concerning the Elimination of Racial and Ethnic Discrimination, and Law Number 29 of 1999 concerning the International Ratification Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination 1965. (Konvensi Internasional tentang Penghapusan Segala Bentuk Diskriminasi Rasial 1965).

The Indonesian government is taking proactive measures to educate the public and combat stereotypes and prejudices that can fuel political tensions based on identity and religion. Through initiatives like the Religious Moderation program, the aim is to promote tolerance and respect for differences among communities. However, there is still room for improvement in ensuring the rights of civil society, including freedom of religion and belief.(Imparsial: The Indonesia Human Rights Monitor, 2022; SETARA: Institute for Democracy and Peace, 2022). The government's effectiveness in maintaining stability during and after the election period is being evaluated, with the ultimate goal of fostering a more harmonious and stable social environment in ASEAN.(Amnesty International, 2023). At the ASEAN level, despite the principle of non-intervention being its main basis, the organization is actively working to address issues related to identity politics and religion in the region through dialogue and diplomacy. By facilitating peaceful resolution of political conflicts among its

member countries, ASEAN aims to achieve a consensus that benefits all parties involved.(Hedges, 2023; KAICIID DIALOGUE CENTRE, 2023).

ASEAN plays a pivotal role in promoting regional cooperation to address the challenges related to identity politics and religion. By exchanging experiences and knowledge, member countries can learn from each other and develop effective approaches to overcome these tensions. Moreover, ASEAN actively advocates for tolerance, pluralism, and a better understanding of diversity, aiming to raise awareness of the importance of respecting minority rights and reducing tensions arising from misunderstanding or prejudice.

Furthermore, ASEAN endeavors to elevate international awareness about issues affecting political stability in the region, such as identity politics and religion. Through active participation in international forums and collaboration with other organizations, ASEAN contributes to global efforts to address these challenges. Additionally, the organization provides essential support to member countries experiencing political tensions that could threaten regional stability, aiming to facilitate internal conflict resolution while respecting principles of sovereignty and non-intervention.

e. **The Role of Media and Information Dissemination**

In the ASEAN region, the media plays a vital role in addressing the challenges posed by identity politics and religion, which have the potential to disrupt regional stability.(Curato & Fossati, 2020; Djalante et al., 2020). By utilizing various approaches, the media showcases the diverse political, cultural, and social contexts in each country, fostering a deeper understanding of the complex issues and diverse perspectives involved.(Deacon & Stanyer, 2021; Magin et al., 2023). Media outlets offer comprehensive and in-depth coverage of these issues, including news, opinions, and analyses representing different viewpoints from all parties involved.

The media's impact on ASEAN is enormous, serving as an educator and informant about the values of diversity, tolerance, and the significance of honoring differences.(Sinpeng, 2020). Media platforms actively strive to educate the public about the various religions, cultures, and traditions within their countries, aiming to alleviate intergroup tensions.(Campbell, 2010; Moors &

Meyer, 2005). However, it is worth noting the escalating scrutiny of rhetoric and sensitive issues related to identity politics and religion by media crews.(Amira & Abraham, 2022). This oversight is imperative not only for upholding journalistic integrity but also for preserving social harmony in the region.

The research findings are clear that monitoring activities have a significant impact on identity politics and religion, leading to media polarization. While some media groups strive to minimize polarization by avoiding provocative reporting and discrediting certain groups (Azizah, 2023; Lin & Tsai, 2022; Setiawati et al., 2023), others prioritize profit by engaging in political propaganda.(Roosinda & Suryandaru, 2020; Short, 2021; Zollmann, 2017). As a result, civil society experiences polarization, which leads to diverse public opinions, especially concerning identity politics and religion.

The media has skillfully highlighted the impact of identity politics and religion on Human Rights. They have successfully drawn attention to cases of human rights violations against minority groups, aiming to provoke public and government action.(Tapsell, 2020). Nevertheless, media in ASEAN face challenges in addressing these issues. Many outlets have their freedom of expression limited.(Strangio, 2023; Venkiteswaran, 2022), and are subject to repressive actions from political elites, compromising their ability to provide unbiased coverage.(Anggraheni et al., 2021; Junius Fernando et al., 2022; Samsudin & Faridah Ibrahim, 2021) Moreover, political elite groups are now using social media to spread unverified information, further exacerbating social polarization.(Aspinall et al., 2020; Safitri et al., 2022; Saragih, 2020).

The media must receive strong support from civil society, national governments, and international organizations like ASEAN to combat fraudulent practices and amplify their impact on public opinion and political dynamics in ASEAN countries. This support will contribute significantly to reducing the proliferation of identity politics and religious manipulation by certain individuals. Multiple media platforms, encompassing both traditional and social media outlets, should create educational programs to deepen public understanding of national and global politics. Through comprehensive and educational coverage, the media can play a transformative role in shaping

people's attitudes and behaviors regarding sensitive political issues such as religion and ethnicity, countering stereotypes and prejudices that could incite conflicts.

In today's digital age, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram wield immense influence on identity politics and religion. While enabling rapid and widespread information dissemination, they are also susceptible to misinformation, hoaxes, and divisive rhetoric, exacerbating social tensions and political polarization. Hence, it is incumbent upon governments in ASEAN countries to exercise wise regulation of the media, uphold ethical journalism standards, monitor the dissemination of inflammatory content, and support responsible and inclusive media. Above all, the paramount concern for both ASEAN and national governments should be to safeguard the rights of media personnel, particularly ensuring freedom of opinion and expression.

III.   Closing

ASEAN countries are facing significant threats to regional stability, primarily arising from the turmoil in identity politics and religion. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand, which embrace democratic principles in their politics, will continue to encounter real threats from the practices of identity politics and religion throughout 2020-2024. Despite ASEAN's adherence to the principle of non-intervention, as a regional organization in Southeast Asia, it still has the potential to assist its member countries in overcoming the crises caused by identity politics and religion.

One concrete action ASEAN can take is to hold regular forums to provide a space for dialogue among member countries, allowing them to exchange ideas and find solutions to the various problems they face. Why is this so important? The answer is simple: the geopolitical conditions of Southeast Asian countries are interlinked, significantly influencing regional stability. To support ASEAN in managing political dynamics that could disrupt regional stability, greater attention must be given to minority groups and the mass media. The roles of these two groups are crucial in maintaining harmony within and between countries in the region. Identity and religious politics, often triggered by discriminatory practices against minority groups, should compel state

administrators and stakeholders to prioritize the welfare of all citizens, without exception.

Equally important is the role of the mass media as a vehicle for information and education, easily accessible to civil society. The mass media must operate free from practices that violate human rights, especially the freedom of opinion. It is essential for there to be aspirations that serve as reminders and alarms for any government practices that no longer benefit civil society. Each country must fully uphold press freedom legally. ASEAN can serve as a platform to encourage countries to recognize the media's contribution to maintaining regional stability through the press freedom they enjoy.

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