Vol.2 No.1 2026
Pen of Social Science
DOI: https://doi.org/1 10.67793/pss.v2i1.39
https://journal.penkreatif.com/index.php/pss/index

Religious-Based Organizations (RBOs) as Non-State Actors in Peacebuilding and Regional Governance in Southeast Asia

Qudsi Mutawakil Husaini

STAI Al Ittihad Cianjur, Indonesia

E-mail correspondence: qudsimutawakil@stai-alittihad.ac.id

Received: 02 May 2026; Revised: 06 May 2026; Accepted: 07 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of Religious-Based Organizations (RBOs) as non-state actors in peacebuilding and regional governance in Southeast Asia. The study addresses the increasing relevance of religion in International Relations (IR), particularly in a region characterized by religious diversity and recurring ethno-religious conflicts. Using a qualitative literature-based approach, this article analyzes the activities of major RBOs in Indonesia and the Philippines, including Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC). The analysis employs Constructivist and Liberal perspectives to explain how RBOs contribute to norm diffusion, interfaith dialogue, conflict mediation, and humanitarian diplomacy. The findings show that RBOs possess moral legitimacy, grassroots networks, and transnational connections that enable them to influence peacebuilding processes beyond formal state mechanisms. However, their effectiveness remains constrained by weak state collaboration, bureaucratic exclusion, political instrumentalization of religion, and internal ideological fragmentation. The article argues that RBOs function as strategic actors in promoting social cohesion and regional stability in Southeast Asia, although their long-term contribution depends on institutional recognition and stronger multi-level cooperation between religious organizations, civil society, and state actors.

Keywords: Religious-Based Organizations, Peacebuilding, Southeast Asia, International Relations, Non-State Actors, ASEAN, Interfaith Dialogue

INTRODUCTION

International Relations (IR) has historically emphasized the dominance of sovereign states as the primary actors in global politics. Classical realist approaches largely marginalized the role of religion and non-state actors, assuming that modernization and secularization would gradually reduce the influence of religion in public and political life (Waltz 1979; Berger 1967). However, contemporary global developments demonstrate that religion continues to play a significant role in shaping political identities, humanitarian movements, and peacebuilding initiatives. This transformation has encouraged scholars to reconsider the place of religion within IR studies.

The resurgence of religion is particularly visible in Southeast Asia, a region characterized by strong religious diversity and complex socio-political dynamics. Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, and the Philippines have experienced various forms of religious tension, communal conflict, and separatist movements linked to ethno-religious identities. In this context, Religious-Based Organizations (RBOs) have emerged as influential non-state actors involved in conflict mediation, humanitarian assistance, social reconciliation, and interfaith dialogue.

Major organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, as well as the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC) in the Philippines, demonstrate how religious actors operate beyond purely theological domains. These organizations actively engage in peace diplomacy, humanitarian advocacy, and social governance. Their extensive grassroots networks and moral authority allow them to access communities that are often difficult for formal state institutions to reach.

Despite their growing influence, the role of RBOs in IR scholarship remains underexplored. Existing studies frequently emphasize either the positive contribution of religion to peacebuilding or the negative association between religion and radicalism, while insufficiently examining the institutional and political

* Copyright (c) 2026 Husaini
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

Vol.2 No.1 2026
Pen of Social Science
DOI: https://doi.org/1 10.67793/pss.v2i1.39
https://journal.penkreatif.com/index.php/pss/index

limitations faced by religious actors. Furthermore, many discussions remain descriptive and lack analytical connections between theoretical frameworks and empirical cases.

This article aims to analyze the role of RBOs as non-state actors in peacebuilding and regional governance in Southeast Asia. Specifically, the article seeks to: (1) conceptualize RBOs within International Relations theory; (2) examine the contributions of RBOs to peacebuilding and conflict transformation; and (3) evaluate the challenges and limitations faced by RBOs in regional governance processes. By combining theoretical analysis with empirical case studies, this article contributes to a more critical understanding of religion as an active force in regional stability and governance.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach based on literature analysis. The research relies on secondary data obtained from academic journals, books, institutional reports, and policy documents discussing religion, peacebuilding, and non-state actors in Southeast Asia.

The study focuses on three major cases: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC). These organizations were selected because they represent influential religious actors with significant involvement in peacebuilding initiatives, interfaith dialogue, and humanitarian diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

The analytical framework combines Constructivism and Liberalism within International Relations theory. Constructivism is used to examine how religious norms, identities, and moral values shape political behavior and social legitimacy. Liberalism is used to explain the role of transnational networks, cooperation, and non-state actors in regional governance.

Data analysis was conducted through thematic categorization. The collected materials were analyzed based on three themes: (1) the conceptual position of RBOs as non-state actors; (2) the contribution of RBOs to peacebuilding and conflict transformation; and (3) the institutional challenges faced by RBOs in regional governance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualizing Religious-Based Organizations (RBOs) as Non-State Actors in International Relations

The growing prominence of Religious-Based Organizations (RBOs) as influential actors in the international arena necessitates a robust and precise conceptual framework that clearly delineates their unique characteristics and distinguishes them from traditional state actors, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and secular non-governmental organizations (NGOs). RBOs are fundamentally non-state entities whose foundational identity, core mission, and operational activities are inextricably linked to and derived from specific religious beliefs, values, and communities (Haynes 2009; Johnston and Sampson 1994). Unlike their secular counterparts, the driving force behind RBOs often stems from deeply held theological imperatives, profound moral convictions, and a compelling sense of divine mandate or sacred duty (Benthall 2008; Philpott 2007). This intrinsic connection to faith traditions imbues RBOs with a distinct character, profoundly influencing their operational modalities, their relationships with diverse stakeholders, and their overall capacity to impact global affairs, often granting them unique sources of legitimacy, resilience, and unparalleled mobilization capacity that secular organizations may not possess (Hurd 2008; Gill 2008).

RBOs possess several distinctive characteristics that set them apart within the broader landscape of non-state actors. Firstly, their moral authority and spiritual legitimacy frequently afford them a level of trust and access within local communities that secular organizations or even state entities often struggle to cultivate (Thomas 2os05; Forest and Johnson 2011). This inherent moral standing enables them to effectively mediate complex conflicts, advocate tirelessly for marginalized and vulnerable populations, and promote ethical

Vol.2 No.1 2026
Pen of Social Science
DOI: https://doi.org/1 10.67793/pss.v2i1.39
https://journal.penkreatif.com/index.php/pss/index

governance with a credibility that is deeply rooted in their perceived adherence to higher, often transcendent, principles (Hurd 2008; Haynes 2009). Secondly, RBOs typically boast an extensive grassroots reach and profound community embeddedness, allowing them to mobilize vast numbers of adherents and deliver essential services directly to populations in remote, underserved, or conflict-affected areas (Benthall 2008; Gill 2008). Their organizational networks often extend seamlessly from local congregations and parishes to national federations and, crucially, to sophisticated transnational movements, providing a robust and resilient infrastructure for rapid response and sustained action (Johnston and Sampson 1994; Fox 2004). Thirdly, a significant number of RBOs operate through sophisticated transnational networks, connecting co-religionists across national borders and fostering a powerful sense of global solidarity that transcends conventional geopolitical divisions (Haynes 2009; Thomas 2005). This inherent transnational character empowers them to engage in cross-border humanitarian efforts, advocate on influential international platforms, and actively influence the development and diffusion of global norms, often bypassing or complementing traditional state-centric diplomatic channels (Hurd 2008; Philpott 2007).

The theoretical understanding of RBOs as influential non-state actors in International Relations can be significantly enriched by drawing upon the insights offered by Constructivism and Liberalism. Constructivism, a prominent IR theory that emphasizes the constitutive role of ideas, identities, norms, and social construction in shaping international politics, provides a particularly powerful analytical lens for understanding how religious beliefs and norms profoundly influence state interests and behavior, as well as the very identities and actions of non-state actors themselves (Wendt 1999; Katzenstein 1996).

RBOs, through their persistent norm diffusion efforts, actively contribute to the social construction of international realities. They can introduce entirely new norms (e.g., the concept of "Humanitarian Islam" as articulated by certain Indonesian RBOs) or critically challenge existing ones, thereby influencing the "logic of appropriateness" that guides both state and non-state behavior in the international system (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Hurd 2008). Their pivotal role in identity formation is also paramount, as RBOs frequently shape collective self-understandings that can transcend national borders, fostering a powerful sense of shared religious identity that directly influences political action and international solidarity (Fox 2004; Mandaville 2007). For instance, the concept of the Ummah (global Muslim community), actively promoted by some transnational RBOs, can generate cross-border solidarities that significantly impact foreign policy decisions and regional alignments (Mandaville 2007; Haynes 2009).

Liberalism, particularly its emphasis on transnationalism, complex interdependence, and multi-level governance, also offers invaluable insights into the operational dynamics and global impact of RBOs. Liberal IR theory, in contrast to strict realism, readily acknowledges the increasing importance of non-state actors, international institutions, and cross-border flows in shaping global outcomes, thereby moving beyond a purely state-centric worldview (Keohane and Nye 1977; Doyle 1986). RBOs, through their extensive cross-border activities, their active engagement with international organizations, and their participation in global advocacy networks, perfectly exemplify the liberal emphasis on complex interdependence and the diffusion of power among a diverse array of actors in the international system (Hurd 2008; Johnston and Sampson 1994). Their consistent participation in interfaith dialogues, their crucial roles within humanitarian networks, and their formation of advocacy coalitions demonstrate how non-state actors can significantly contribute to global governance and effectively address shared challenges that often transcend the capacities of individual states (Benthall 2008; Gill 2008). This theoretical perspective highlights RBOs not merely as recipients of aid or objects of state policy, but as active agents capable of shaping the international agenda and contributing to collective problem-solving.

A particularly critical concept for fully comprehending the pervasive influence of RBOs in international affairs is "sacred capital." This analytical construct refers to the substantial religious resources

 ISSN : 3124-1158

Vol.2 No.1 2026
Pen of Social Science
DOI: https://doi.org/1 10.67793/pss.v2i1.39
https://journal.penkreatif.com/index.php/pss/index

that an RBO (or, in some cases, a state) possesses by virtue of its deep historical legacy, its institutional prominence, and the widespread recognition and reverence accorded to its religious authorities (Bettiza 2020; Mandaville 2007). For RBOs, sacred capital can manifest in various forms: a revered lineage of influential scholars and spiritual leaders, a vast and deeply rooted network of educational institutions (such as pesantren or madrasahs), or a distinguished history of moral leadership and courageous action during times of profound crisis (Bettiza 2020; Haynes 2009). This accumulated capital provides them with an inherent and often unquestioned legitimacy and a unique capacity to attract, persuade, and mobilize, akin to a potent form of "religious soft power" (Nye 2004; Ozturk 2023). For example, Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) profound historical depth, its extensive network of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) across Indonesia, and its long-standing commitment to Islam Nusantara (Islam of the Archipelago) significantly contribute to its vast sacred capital, enabling it to launch ambitious global initiatives like the "Islamic Jurisprudence of Civilisation" with immense theological weight and moral authority (Schulze 2023; Bush 2009).

The effective mobilization of this sacred capital allows RBOs to powerfully shape public narratives, influence public opinion, and engage in various forms of diplomacy with a moral authority that can powerfully complement, or even strategically challenge, state-led diplomatic efforts (Mandaville 2007; Hurd 2008). However, the utility and reach of sacred capital are not without inherent limitations; its effectiveness is often constrained by factors such as cultural specificity, the internal fragmentation within religious traditions, and the perceived credibility of the particular actors wielding it (Fox 2004; Haynes 2009). Its application requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts and a recognition that religious authority is not monolithic.

The Role of RBOs in Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation in Southeast Asia

Religious-Based Organizations (RBOs) play a multifaceted, dynamic, and increasingly indispensable role in peacebuilding and conflict transformation across the diverse and often volatile landscape of Southeast Asia. Their contributions extend far beyond conventional humanitarian assistance, encompassing critical and often transformative areas such as interfaith dialogue, conflict mediation, peace education, and the active promotion of social cohesion and reconciliation. These efforts are particularly salient and impactful in a region characterized by profound religious diversity, complex historical grievances, and a persistent history of ethno-religious conflicts (Al Qurtuby 2025; Kingsbury 2005). The deep societal embeddedness of RBOs, combined with their moral authority, often positions them as uniquely effective agents for fostering sustainable peace where state-centric approaches may fall short.

One of the most prominent and impactful contributions of RBOs is their extensive engagement in interfaith dialogue and mediation. RBOs frequently serve as crucial, trusted facilitators of communication and understanding between disparate religious communities, particularly in contexts where deep-seated historical tensions or ongoing conflicts persist (Thomas 2005; Forest and Johnson 2011). They possess an unparalleled ability to build mutual trust, foster empathy, and bridge profound divides due to their inherent moral authority and deep, organic roots within local communities (Gill 2008; Haynes 2009). In Indonesia, for instance, major Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah have consistently been at the vanguard of these critical efforts. NU, a colossal traditionalist Islamic organization, has initiated a significant global movement for reforming Islamic jurisprudence, explicitly seeking interpretations that benefit all humanity regardless of religious affiliation, including the theological legitimization of the United Nations Charter and the concept of the nation-state (Schulze 2023; Bush 2009).

Their centennial conference in Surabaya in 2023, the R20 (Religion of Twenty) summit, publicly positioned NU as a staunch supporter of the UN and its Charter, emphasizing international peace, cooperation, and explicitly rejecting the transnational, often violent, idea of a global caliphate (Schulze 2023). This groundbreaking initiative emerged from an internal NU theological debate, recognizing that existing classical Islamic jurisprudence urgently required reform to align with modern global realities and universal

humanitarian values, effectively demonstrating a proactive religious diplomacy (Schulze 2023; Bush 2009). Muhammadiyah, a modernist Islamic organization advocating for "Progressive Islam" (Islam Berkemajuan), has also actively engaged in crucial mediation efforts between Islamist guerrilla groups and the Philippine and Thai governments, and both NU and Muhammadiyah have dispatched high-profile delegations to Israel and Palestine to advocate for non-violence, dialogue, and a just peace (Schulze 2023; Hefner 2001). These concerted efforts vividly demonstrate a proactive, multi-track approach to peace-brokering and norm dissemination on both regional and global scales, extending the reach of religious actors beyond their traditional confines (Rueland, von Luebke, and Baumann 2019; Thomas 2005).

In the Philippines, particularly in the conflict-ridden region of Mindanao, where a protracted and deeply entrenched conflict between Muslim separatists and the government has resulted in significant human casualties and displacement, religious actors have assumed increasingly crucial roles in peacebuilding (Rueland, von Luebke, and Baumann 2019; U.S. Department of State 2023). Christian churches, alongside influential interfaith councils such as the Bishops-Ulama Conference (BUC), have tirelessly fostered interreligious understanding, mediated local and regional conflicts, and painstakingly built positive relationships across deep-seated ethnic and religious divides (Rueland, von Luebke, and Baumann 2019; Forest and Johnson 2011). Their notable success is often attributed to their profound social legitimacy, their ability to operate with a degree of independence from state political interests, and their perceived neutrality, which allows them to act as more trusted and effective mediators than purely governmental actors (Gill 2008; Thomas 2005).

Similarly, in Southern Thailand, where a complex insurgency persists, local ulama and respected Muslim leaders have actively created vital interfaith dialogue spaces in conflict zones, establishing themselves as community-recognized peacemakers and significantly contributing to the reduction of horizontal tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities (Sidik and Dilawati 2025; Dubus 2018). These compelling examples unequivocally underscore the unique capacity of RBOs to engage effectively in "track-two diplomacy" and "track-three diplomacy," facilitating crucial informal dialogues and reconciliation processes where formal state channels may be limited, mistrusted, or simply unable to reach (Pachkhédé 2025; Johnston and Sampson 1994).

Beyond direct mediation and dialogue, RBOs are deeply and extensively involved in humanitarian aid and development work, frequently reaching vulnerable populations in remote, marginalized, or conflict-affected areas that are often inaccessible or overlooked by state agencies or large international organizations. Their faith-based motivations provide a powerful and enduring impetus for service, deeply rooted in universal principles of compassion, charity, social justice, and human dignity (Benthall 2008; Motiwala 2025). This comprehensive involvement includes providing immediate disaster relief following natural calamities, delivering essential healthcare services, establishing and maintaining educational institutions, and implementing various poverty alleviation programs, thereby directly contributing to human security and fostering long-term stability and resilience (Gill 2008; Haynes 2009).

For instance, the concept of "Humanitarian Islam" actively promoted by NU's youth wing, Ansor, reflects a profound commitment to addressing global challenges through practical, on-the-ground action, demonstrating a proactive and engaged religious humanitarianism (Schulze 2023). This approach not only provides immediate relief but also builds social capital and trust within communities, which are vital for sustained peace.

Furthermore, RBOs play an absolutely vital role in promoting religious education for peace and tolerance. Many RBOs operate extensive and influential educational networks, ranging from traditional religious schools (like pesantren and madrasahs) to modern universities, which serve as crucial sites for shaping attitudes towards diversity, fostering tolerance, and imparting skills for conflict resolution (Sidik and

ISSN : 3124-1158

Vol.2 No.1 2026
Pen of Social Science
DOI: https://doi.org/1 10.67793/pss.v2i1.39
https://journal.penkreatif.com/index.php/pss/index

Dilawati 2025; Hefner 2001). Progressive pesantren in Indonesia, often supported by the educational arms of NU and Muhammadiyah, have developed innovative and moderate curricula explicitly designed to curb radicalism, promote interreligious reconciliation, and instill values of pluralism (Sidik and Dilawati 2025; Bush 2009). Indonesia's increasingly internationalized Islamic higher education system, with flagship institutions like the Indonesian International Islamic University (IIIU), explicitly functions as a "diplomacy campus" (Kampus Diplomasi) to strategically disseminate a moderate and inclusive Islamic message globally, challenging established centers of Islamic knowledge production and actively fostering inter-religious dialogue among a diverse cohort of international students (Schulze 2023). This profound emphasis on education, deeply grounded in principles of empathy, critical thinking, and interfaith openness, is widely regarded as an exceptionally effective medium for fostering long-term peace, cultivating collective awareness that profoundly respects diverse identities, and building a resilient social fabric (Sidik and Dilawati 2025; Thomas 2005). The educational initiatives of RBOs thus represent a foundational investment in future generations, shaping their worldview to embrace coexistence and reject extremism.

The contributions of RBOs to peacebuilding are not merely reactive responses to existing conflicts but often represent proactive and preventative efforts aimed at building robust social cohesion and community resilience. They skillfully leverage local wisdom, cultural sensitivity, and traditional conflict resolution practices to foster constructive dialogue and resolve disputes, often proving significantly more effective and sustainable than externally imposed or top-down methods (Sidik and Dilawati 2025; Forest and Johnson 2011). This deep engagement with local contexts, combined with their unparalleled ability to mobilize and empower communities from the grassroots up, makes RBOs indispensable partners in transforming entrenched conflict dynamics and building truly sustainable peace in Southeast Asia. Their legitimacy and effectiveness stem from their organic connection to the communities they serve, allowing them to address root causes of conflict and build lasting solutions.

RBOs in Regional Governance and Diplomacy: The ASEAN Context

The increasing recognition of Religious-Based Organizations (RBOs) as significant non-state actors has progressively led to their growing, albeit still evolving and often challenging, engagement within established regional governance frameworks, most notably within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). While ASEAN has historically maintained a staunch adherence to the principles of state sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and a largely intergovernmental mode of operation, the complex and increasingly transnational nature of contemporary challenges—including ethno-religious tensions, humanitarian crises, and the imperative for sustainable development—has necessitated a broader and more inclusive engagement with civil society, prominently including RBOs (Acharya 2014; Six 2022; Emmerson 2003). This shift reflects a pragmatic acknowledgment that effective regional governance in a deeply diverse region like Southeast Asia cannot be achieved by states alone.

ASEAN's evolving and progressively more inclusive approach to RBOs is increasingly articulated within its foundational strategic blueprints and declarations. The "ASEAN Community 2025: Forging Ahead Together" document, a pivotal roadmap for the region's future, places significant and explicit emphasis on the imperative need to engage the diverse peoples of ASEAN to deepen the collective ASEAN identity and foster a stronger sense of regional belonging (ASEAN Secretariat 2015; Human Rights Resource Centre 2025). This commitment explicitly includes the involvement of "spiritually inspired" stakeholders—a clear reference to RBOs and faith communities—in the crucial processes of development, implementation, and monitoring of policies and programs specifically aimed at enhancing regional peace, security, and socio-cultural resilience (Human Rights Resource Centre 2025; Kemenag 2025). This marks a notable and significant conceptual shift within ASEAN, moving beyond merely viewing RBOs as charitable entities or providers of

social services to recognizing them as legitimate, influential, and potentially transformative partners in regional governance and comprehensive development (Acharya 2014; Six 2022).

The explicit inclusion of "spiritually inspired" groups underscores a growing awareness within ASEAN of the profound and pervasive influence of religion on societal dynamics across its member states and its immense potential contribution to fostering regional stability and cooperation, particularly in areas where state capacity or legitimacy may be limited (Jones 2007; Siddique 2010).

This growing recognition has naturally led to concrete proposals for formalizing and institutionalizing RBO involvement within ASEAN's intricate structures. Discussions among policymakers, academics, and civil society representatives have included actionable suggestions such as the establishment of an "ASEAN association of faith-based organizations" to provide a unified voice and platform for RBOs, and the creation of a regular, institutionalized platform for ASEAN to engage systematically with faith communities on a wide array of economic, social, and security challenges (Human Rights Resource Centre 2025; Sidik and Dilawati 2025).

A particularly key recommendation, aimed at enhancing practical engagement, is the appointment of a dedicated liaison officer or unit within the ASEAN Secretariat specifically tasked with working closely and consistently with faith-based organizations across the region (Human Rights Resource Centre 2025). Such formalization would not only institutionalize the role of RBOs but also provide them with a more direct, recognized, and consistent channel to influence regional policy-making, contribute to collective problem-solving, and participate in the implementation of regional initiatives (Acharya 2014). This strategic move reflects a growing understanding among ASEAN policymakers that the long-term effectiveness and legitimacy of regional organizations increasingly depend on their ability to systematically involve these powerful non-state religious actors, moving beyond ad-hoc, informal engagements to a more structured, predictable, and mutually beneficial partnership (Emmerson 2003; Thomas 2005).

RBOs serve as crucial and indispensable bridges between top-down state policy and bottom-up grassroots realities. With their deep community roots, inherent moral authority, and extensive networks, they are uniquely positioned to translate often abstract or bureaucratic state policies into locally relevant, culturally sensitive, and actionable programs (Forest and Johnson 2011; Gill 2008). Conversely, they possess an unparalleled capacity to effectively channel grassroots concerns, needs, and aspirations upwards to regional and national policymakers, ensuring that policies are responsive to the lived experiences of ordinary citizens (Haynes 2009; Thomas 2005).

This multi-level engagement significantly enhances the legitimacy, effectiveness, and sustainability of regional initiatives, ensuring that policies are not only well-conceived at the strategic level but also culturally sensitive, contextually appropriate, and widely accepted by the populace they are intended to serve (Burchill and Linklater 2009). For example, in Indonesia, the collaborative efforts between state institutions (such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs) and major Islamic civil society organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in promoting the national "Religious Moderation" policy vividly demonstrate this synergistic relationship (Schulze 2023; Sari 2024). While the state provides the overarching policy framework and resources, NU and Muhammadiyah, through their vast networks of educational institutions, community programs, and influential leaders, actively disseminate these values at the grassroots level and engage in international peace diplomacy, effectively acting as key implementers and legitimizers of state policy (Schulze 2023; Bush 2009).

Examples of RBOs increasingly influencing regional agendas and contributing to regional diplomacy are becoming more pronounced and strategically significant. The R20 (Religion of Twenty) summit, an official Engagement Group of the G20, meticulously hosted by Indonesia in Bali in 2022, stands as a prime illustration of RBOs (specifically NU, in close collaboration with the Indonesian government) strategically

ISSN : 3124-1158

Vol.2 No.1 2026
Pen of Social Science
DOI: https://doi.org/1 10.67793/pss.v2i1.39
https://journal.penkreatif.com/index.php/pss/index

placing religion at the forefront of global political and economic discussions (Schulze 2023). This groundbreaking initiative brought together religious leaders and scholars from across the globe to deliberate on faith as a potent solution to complex global problems, actively promoting interfaith solidarity, mutual respect, and cooperation among diverse nations (Schulze 2023).

Such high-profile platforms empower RBOs to significantly contribute to global and regional agenda-setting, norm diffusion, and the shaping of shared civilizational values that underpin broader regional cooperation and stability (Bettiza 2020; Mandaville 2007). Furthermore, RBOs frequently engage in various forms of "track-two" or "track-three" diplomacy, facilitating crucial informal dialogues, building trust, and fostering relationships across religious and national divides that effectively complement and often precede formal state-to-state interactions (Pachkhédé 2025; Johnston and Sampson 1994). This vital "diplomacy from below" can be particularly effective in addressing sensitive and deeply entrenched ethno-religious issues that formal diplomatic channels might struggle with due to political sensitivities or lack of trust, thereby making an invaluable contribution to regional stability and mutual understanding (Forest and Johnson 2011; Gill 2008). The emphasis on "unity in diversity" (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika) within the ASEAN Charter, a principle that resonates deeply with the pluralistic nature of Southeast Asian societies, finds profound practical expression through the tireless work of RBOs that actively cultivate a sense of shared identity, common destiny, and belonging across diverse communities, transcending national boundaries (Acharya 2014; ASEAN Secretariat 2015).

Challenges and Limitations for RBOs in Peacebuilding and Regional Governance

Despite their significant and increasingly recognized contributions, Religious-Based Organizations (RBOs) in Southeast Asia operate within a complex and often challenging environment, facing a myriad of structural, political, and internal limitations that frequently constrain their full potential in peacebuilding and regional governance. These inherent challenges can undermine the efficacy of their well-intentioned efforts and, in some cases, even lead to unintended negative consequences, complicating the landscape of religious engagement in international affairs. A critical examination of these barriers is essential for a nuanced understanding of their role.

One of the most pervasive and persistent challenges is the weak synergy and often strained relationship between state and religious actors, frequently characterized by the dominance of state-led approaches that are inherently bureaucratic, often militaristic, or overtly exclusive towards civil society initiatives (Sidik and Dilawati 2025; Rueland, von Luebke, and Baumann 2019). While democratization processes have made strides in various parts of Southeast Asia, they are frequently overshadowed by the persistence of weak state institutions, a lack of genuine political will, and a deeply ingrained state tendency to control and limit civic space (Crouch 2000; Kingsbury 2005). This pervasive state control severely restricts the opportunities for non-state actors, including influential religious leaders and RBOs, to systematically influence peace policies and participate meaningfully in formal decision-making processes, relegating them to an advisory or implementational role rather than a co-equal partnership (Sidik and Dilawati 2025; Thomas 2005).

For instance, peace diplomacy efforts undertaken by prominent Islamic civil society organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, despite their global reach and theological depth, often lack full and consistent state support, leading to a discernible disconnect between civil society-led religious diplomacy and formal state foreign policy (Schulze 2023; Sidik and Dilawati 2025). Despite their significant contributions to international forums and their engagement with pressing global issues, their strategic roles may proceed without official diplomatic endorsement or systematic integration, highlighting a persistent gap in coordinated and holistic national efforts (Haynes 2009).

Vol.2 No.1 2026
Pen of Social Science
DOI: https://doi.org/1 10.67793/pss.v2i1.39
https://journal.penkreatif.com/index.php/pss/index

Furthermore, the pervasive influence of militarism in state policy frequently acts as a significant impediment to RBO efforts in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. In contexts of protracted conflict, such as the devastating Marawi conflict in the Southern Philippines, state policies driven by an overwhelming reliance on military solutions and security-centric approaches have actively obstructed and marginalized community-based peace initiatives (Sidik and Dilawati 2025; Rueland, von Luebke, and Baumann 2019). Even when local, culturally grounded mediation models, often spearheaded by respected religious actors, demonstrate immense potential and garner high levels of community trust and legitimacy, they frequently receive no institutional space or formal recognition within centralized, top-down state policies (Forest and Johnson 2011; Sidik and Dilawati 2025).

This rigid and exclusionary security-first approach, often strategically exploited by political elites to manage religious violence and sectarian tensions for their own ends, implies that peacebuilding efforts cannot fully succeed or achieve sustainability unless the state fundamentally reforms its approach to conflict resolution, moving beyond purely coercive measures (Kingsbury 2005; Crouch 2000). Such "illiberal peace-building" strategies, which systematically exclude local actors and religious communities from meaningful negotiations and policy design, inadvertently weaken the state's moral authority, erode public trust, and diminish its capacity to project a truly peaceful and inclusive image through religious soft power on the international stage (Sidik and Dilawati 2025; Hurd 2008).

The marginalization of RBOs in formal peace processes represents another critical and often frustrating limitation. Despite possessing profound transformative capacity, deep community trust, and a nuanced understanding of local conflict dynamics, religious actors are frequently treated as mere symbolic additions to peace processes rather than substantive, equal partners in conflict policy design and implementation (Sidik and Dilawati 2025; Rueland, von Luebke, and Baumann 2019).

This persistent lack of genuine recognition and meaningful inclusion significantly diminishes their potential impact and perpetuates a critical issue of a chronic lack of local ownership in many of Southeast Asia's peace processes, which are often driven by elite interests, external institutional agendas, or disconnected international interventions (Thomas 2005; Gill 2008). Without the active, sustained, and meaningful involvement of local religious communities and their leaders, achieving truly sustainable and equitable peace remains an elusive goal. Bureaucratic resistance, as vividly seen in national education bureaucracies in Thailand that often lack responsiveness to peace and pluralism curricula developed by RBOs, also poses a significant and entrenched obstacle to RBOs' efforts in promoting peace education and fostering interfaith harmony through formal channels (Sidik and Dilawati 2025; Dubus 2018). This institutional inertia can stifle innovative approaches and limit the reach of peace-oriented educational initiatives.

Moreover, internal contradictions and inherent complexities within religious communities themselves can pose significant and often unpredictable challenges to the peacebuilding efforts of RBOs. While many prominent RBOs actively champion moderation, tolerance, and interfaith harmony, the broader religious landscape in Southeast Asia is simultaneously experiencing what many scholars describe as a "conservative turn" or a rise in religious majoritarianism (Six 2022; Hefner 2001). This phenomenon manifests in various forms, including the proliferation of more conservative legal frameworks, the emergence of religiously inflected consumer cultures, and, disturbingly, the rise of intolerant attitudes and discriminatory practices towards religious and sexual minorities (Schulze 2023; Al Qurtuby 2025; Jones 2007).

This often creates a discernible and problematic gap between the externally projected image of moderation and inclusivity by some RBOs (especially those engaged in international diplomacy) and the internal realities of growing religious majoritarianism or even fundamentalism within their broader constituencies (Hughes 2006; Six 2022). For example, while NU officially abrogated the controversial concept of kafir (unbeliever) to assert equality for all Indonesians regardless of faith, numerous existing statutes and

 ISSN : 3124-1158

regulations in Indonesia still restrict religious freedom, including stringent blasphemy laws that disproportionately affect minorities and are often instrumentalized against them (Schulze 2023; U.S. Department of State 2024). This incongruence between progressive rhetoric and persistent discriminatory realities can lead to accusations of hypocrisy from external observers and internal dissent from more liberal or marginalized factions, thereby undermining the authenticity and long-term credibility of religious diplomacy (Hughes 2006; Haynes 2009). The instrumentalization of religion for narrow political mobilization, as tragically seen with radical Buddhist movements in Myanmar or various Salafi-Islamist groupings in Indonesia, further complicates the landscape, posing significant challenges for state institutions that may fail to manage religious sentiments wisely or effectively (Al Qurtuby 2025; Prianti 2019).

Finally, the inherent ambivalence and paradoxical nature of religion itself is a fundamental and often overlooked challenge to the consistent, predictable, and universally positive application of religious soft power in international relations (Ozturk 2023; Fox 2006). Religion, by its very essence, is often described as a "double-edged sword," possessing the profound capacity to inspire both deep and enduring peace, compassion, and unity, yet simultaneously capable of fueling devastating conflict, radicalization, and societal division (Fox 2006; Ozturk 2023).

This inherent duality means that even well-intentioned RBO initiatives, guided by noble principles, can yield varied and sometimes unintended or counterproductive outcomes, such as the exacerbation of existing tensions rather than their resolution, particularly when religious narratives are instrumentalized for political ends in contexts already marked by existing ethno-religious fault lines (Al Qurtuby 2025; Prianti 2019). The conceptual ambiguity and lack of precise definition surrounding "religious soft power" further complicates its strategic application, leading to potential misapplication, misinterpretation of strategies, or unrealistic expectations of its impact (Ozturk 2023; Mandaville 2023). These instances underscore the complex, often unpredictable, and inherently paradoxical nature of religious influence in international relations, demanding a cautious, nuanced, and context-sensitive approach to its diplomatic application and engagement with RBOs. Recognizing this inherent duality is crucial for developing effective strategies that harness religion's positive potential while mitigating its risks.

CONCLUSION

The comprehensive analysis presented in this article unequivocally underscores the profound, dynamic, and increasingly recognized role of Religious-Based Organizations (RBOs) as indispensable non-state actors in peacebuilding, humanitarian efforts, and the broader landscape of regional governance in Southeast Asia. The historical marginalization of religion and non-state actors within traditional International Relations theory has been decisively challenged by the undeniable and pervasive resurgence of faith in global politics, particularly within the complex and deeply diverse ethno-religious tapestry of Southeast Asia. RBOs, with their unique moral authority derived from spiritual legitimacy, their extensive grassroots reach deeply embedded within local communities, and their sophisticated transnational networks connecting co-religionists across borders, offer a distinct and often more effective pathway to fostering social cohesion, promoting reconciliation, and achieving sustainable stability compared to purely state-centric or secular approaches. Their capacity to mobilize human and material resources, coupled with their inherent credibility, positions them as crucial partners in addressing complex societal challenges.

The conceptualization of RBOs as vital non-state actors is significantly enriched and deepened by theoretical lenses such as Constructivism and Liberalism. Constructivism illuminates how RBOs actively contribute to norm diffusion, shaping shared understandings and influencing the "logic of appropriateness" that guides behavior in the international system by introducing new ethical frameworks or challenging existing ones. Liberalism, in turn, highlights their crucial role in transnationalism and multi-level governance, recognizing their inherent capacity to address

complex global challenges that transcend traditional state boundaries through cross-border collaboration and engagement with international institutions. The concept of "sacred capital" further explains how RBOs strategically leverage their inherent religious resources—such as revered scholars, extensive educational networks, and deep historical legacies of moral leadership—to project influence and build credibility, thereby acting as potent agents of "religious soft power" that complements or even challenges state diplomacy.

Empirical evidence meticulously gathered from across Southeast Asia vividly illustrates the multifaceted, diverse, and often transformative contributions of RBOs. In Indonesia, colossal organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah actively engage in profound interfaith dialogue, mediate complex conflicts, and proactively promote a moderate, inclusive Islamic discourse globally, exemplified by groundbreaking initiatives like the R20 summit and the strategic internationalization of Islamic higher education to disseminate peaceful values. In the Philippines, influential Christian churches and dynamic interfaith councils play crucial and often life-saving roles in peacebuilding in conflict-affected areas like Mindanao, frequently gaining greater trust and legitimacy from local populations than state-led projects dues to their perceived neutrality and deep community embeddedness. These RBOs are not merely reactive to crises but proactively engage in comprehensive peace education, deliver essential humanitarian aid, and undertake long-term development work, leveraging their deep community embeddedness and moral authority to foster lasting reconciliation and sustainable progress. Furthermore, the evolving and increasingly formalized engagement of RBOs within regional frameworks like ASEAN, including concrete proposals for their formal inclusion in policy discussions and the appointment of dedicated liaisons within the ASEAN Secretariat, signifies a growing and pragmatic recognition of their strategic importance in regional governance and diplomacy.

Despite these transformative contributions, RBOs in Southeast Asia navigate a complex and often challenging landscape fraught with significant structural, political, and internal limitations. The persistent weak synergy between state and religious actors, often characterized by pervasive state control over civic space, bureaucratic resistance to civil society initiatives, and a preference for top-down approaches, frequently marginalizes RBOs' efforts in formal peace processes. Militaristic state policies can actively obstruct and undermine community-based peace approaches, leading to a profound disconnect between top-down security strategies and grassroots realities. Moreover, internal contradictions within religious communities themselves, such as the observed "conservative turn" and the instrumentalization of religion for narrow political ends, can tragically undermine the authenticity of RBOs' external projections of moderation and lead to accusations of hypocrisy or partisanship, eroding their credibility. The inherent ambivalence and paradoxical nature of religion itself means that its deployment in peacebuilding can yield unpredictable and sometimes unintended negative consequences, potentially exacerbating existing tensions rather than resolving them, especially when religious narratives are manipulated in contexts marked by pre-existing ethno-religious fault lines.

In conclusion, RBOs are an undeniable, increasingly potent, and indispensable force in Southeast Asian international relations. Their efficacy, however, is not a given; it is profoundly contingent upon overcoming these systemic barriers through enhanced, genuine, and multi-level collaboration between state and non-state actors, a sincere recognition from state institutions of their substantive contributions, and a fundamental commitment from governments to reform rigid and exclusionary approaches. Future research should continue to explore the nuanced interplay of these complex factors, particularly focusing on the long-term impacts of the conservative turn on RBO initiatives, the development of more robust theoretical frameworks that accurately capture the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of religion in international affairs, and the optimal mechanisms for systematically integrating RBOs into formal regional governance structures to maximize their peacebuilding potential. The success of sustainable peacebuilding and long-term regional stability in Southeast Asia ultimately hinges on fostering authentic, inclusive, and collaborative partnerships that genuinely harness the full transformative potential of RBOs to embody and disseminate universal values of peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding, both domestically and internationally.

ISSN : 3124-1158

FUNDING

This research received no external funding.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI USE DECLARATION

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

ETHICAL CLEARANCE

Ethical clearance was not required for this study because the research did not involve human participants, identifiable personal data, or procedures requiring formal ethical approval.

REFERENCES

Acharya, A. (2014). The ASEAN Way: A Contemporary Assessment. Stanford University Press.

Al Qurtuby, S. (2025). Resurgent Religion and the Challenges for Inter- and Intra-religious Relations and Dialogue in Southeast Asia. Religious Inquiries, 14(1), 20-44.

ASEAN Secretariat. (2015). ASEAN Community Vision 2025: Forging Ahead Together. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat.

Benthall, J. (2008, October). Humanitarianism and Islam: The 'Faith-Based' Dimension. Journal of Humanitarian Assistance.

Berger, P. L. (1967). The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion. Doubleday.

Bettiza, G. (2020). The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power: How States Use Religion in Foreign Policy. Oxford University Press.

Burchill, S., & Linklater, A. (2009). Theories of International Relations (4th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bush, R. (2009). Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Islam in Indonesia. Equinox Publishing.

Casanova, J. (1994). Public Religions in the Modern World. University of Chicago Press.

Crouch, H. (2000). The Indonesian Army and the Transition to Democracy. Southeast Asian Affairs 2000, 111-125.

Doyle, M. W. (1986). Liberalism and World Politics. American Political Science Review, 80(4), 1151-1169.

Dubus, A. (2018). Buddhism and Politics in Thailand. IRASEC.

Emmerson, D. K. (2003). Southeast Asia: What's in a Name? Journal of Asian Studies, 62(4), 1121-1140.

Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. International Organization, 52(4), 887-917.

Forest, J. J. F., & Johnson, A. (Eds.). (2011). Religion and Conflict Resolution. Routledge.
Fox, J. (2004). Religion, Civilization, and Civil War: 1945 Through the New Millennium. Lexington Books.
Fox, J. (2006). The Multiple Impacts of Religion on International Relations: Perceptions and Reality. Politique Étrangère, 4, 1059-1071.
Gill, A. (2008). The Political Origins of Religious Liberty. Cambridge University Press.
Grim, B. J., & Finke, R. (2011). The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century. Cambridge University Press.
Habermas, J. (2006). Religion in the Public Sphere. European Journal of Philosophy, 14(1), 1-25.
Haynes, J. (2009). Religion and International Relations. Palgrave Macmillan.
Hefner, R. W. (2001). The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. University of Hawaii Press.
Human Rights Resource Centre. (2025). Southeast Asian Faith-Based Groups Agree to Contribute to Enhancing Regional Peace and Security. Retrieved July 22, 2025, from https://hrrca.org/southeast-asian-faith-based-groups-agree-to-contribute-to-enhancing-regional-peace-and-security/
Hughes, J. (2006, June 30). Malaysia's Islam Hadhari: An Antidote to Extremism? Hudson Institute.
Huntington, S. P. (1993). The Clash of Civilizations? Foreign Affairs, 72(3), 22-49.
Hurd, E. S. (2008). The Politics of Secularism in International Relations. Princeton University Press.
Johnston, D., & Sampson, C. (Eds.). (1994). Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft. Oxford University Press.
Jones, S. (2007). The Rise of Militant Islam in Southeast Asia. Journal of Democracy, 18(2), 113-125.
Katzenstein, P. J. (Ed.). (1996). The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics. Columbia University Press.
Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (1977). Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition. Little, Brown.
Kemenag. (2025, July 15). Southeast Asia's Economic Future Is Tied to Religious Harmony. Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia. https://kemenag.go.id/opini/southeast-asia-s-economic-future-is-tied-to-religious-harmony-l2JCN
Kingsbury, D. (2005). The Politics of Indonesia. Oxford University Press.
Mandaville, P. (2007). Global Political Islam. Routledge.
Mandaville, P. (2023). The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power: How States Use Religion in Foreign Policy. Oxford University Press.
Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). The Tragedy of Great Power Politics. W. W. Norton & Company.
Motiwala, A. (2025, May 21). Ummatic Soft Power as a Catalyst for Change. Ummatics.
Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. PublicAffairs.
Ozturk, A. E. (2023). Religious Soft Power: Definition(s), Limits and Usage. Religions, 14(2), 135.
Pachkhédé, N. (2025, February 17). The Imperative of Religion in the Study of International Relations. Open Canada.
Philpott, D. (2007). The Challenge of September 11 to International Relations Theory. Journal of Democracy, 18(4), 156-170.
Prianti, R. (2019). Identity Politics in Contemporary Southeast Asia. Journal of International Relations, 5(1), 1-15.
Rueland, J., Luebke, C. V., & Baumann, M. M. (2019). Religious Actors and Conflict Transformation in Southeast Asia: Indonesia and the Philippines. Routledge.
Sari, D. (2024). Religious Moderation in Shaping Interfaith Relations: A Comparative Study of Indonesia and Malaysia. Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama dan Lintas Budaya, 9(2), 1-18.

ISSN : 3124-1158

Schulze, K. E. (2023). Indonesia's Islamic Peace Diplomacy: Crafting a Role Model for Moderate Islam. GIGA Focus Asia, 6, 1-16.

Sidik, M. F., & Dilawati, R. (2025). The Role of Religion in Building Peace in Southeast Asia: A Systematic Literature Review. Focus, 6(1), 15-36.

Siddique, S. (2010). Islam and the State in Southeast Asia: The Dynamics of Coexistence. Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 41(2), 185-204.

Six, C. (2022). South and Southeast Asia: Deep Diversity Under Strain. Journal of Contemporary Asia, 52(5), 705-725.

Taylor, C. (2007). A Secular Age. Harvard University Press.

Thomas, S. M. (2005). The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Othering of the International. Palgrave Macmillan.

U.S. Department of State. (2023). 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Philippines. Retrieved July 22, 2025, from https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/philippines/

U.S. Department of State. (2024). 2024 Report on International Religious Freedom: Indonesia. Accessed July 22, 2025.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). Theory of International Politics. Addison-Wesley.

Wendt, A. (1999). Social Theory of International Politics. Cambridge University Press.