

Religion as Soft Power in International Relations: Islam, Interfaith Dialogue, and Indonesia Foreign Policy

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Abstract. In the past, international relations theories that analyzed relations between countries were fairly ignorant of religious factors. These theories, which have developed mostly in Western countries, do separate the state and religion, focusing on the factor of national interest as the reason why one state relates to another. The term that is often used is secularization or reducing the influence of religious organizations in the political system. But today, it is important to talk about the relationship between international politics and religion. This is because the prediction that modernization will cause society to become more secular is not fully realized. As a result, the state cannot ignore the presence of religion in the practice of international relations. Religion, in most democratic systems in Asia, is a factor that is still very closely related to everyday politics. Religion not only serves as a means to demonstrate spirituality, but also influences the developing social and economic structures. Religion can also be a reason for the masses to move to fight for their aspirations. This article will discuss how Islam and interfaith dialogue can be used as soft power by countries, specifically to strengthen the positive image as Muslim country. This article will also highlight how Indonesia as the biggest Muslim country in the world, use moderate Islam as its new identity in global politics, especially after the events of 9/11. One of the Indonesian efforts is pursued through the inter-faith dialogue.

Keywords: religion, soft power, interfaith dialogue, moderate Islam, international relations.

1 Introduction

Religion has played a significant role in international relations as a form of soft power for centuries. Soft power refers to the ability of a country or entity to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force. Religion can be a powerful tool for soft power because it has the ability to shape values, beliefs, and behaviors, and it can be a source of cultural identity and moral authority. Here are some ways in which religion can be used as soft power in international relations (Abdelkader, 2019, 36-38):

1. **Cultural Influence:** Religion often serves as a foundational aspect of a culture. Countries or groups with a rich religious tradition can use their cultural heritage and religious symbols to attract and engage with others. For example, countries like India and Thailand promote their religious festivals, temples, and traditions to attract tourists and promote cultural exchange.

2. **Diplomacy and Mediation:** Religious leaders and institutions can play a role in diplomatic efforts and conflict resolution. They can act as mediators, bringing conflicting parties together for dialogue and negotiations. For instance, the Vatican has been involved in mediating conflicts and promoting peace in various parts of the world.
3. **Humanitarian and Development Efforts:** Religious organizations often engage in humanitarian and development work, providing aid and assistance to those in need. This can enhance a country's soft power by demonstrating compassion and a commitment to improving the lives of others. For example, various Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist organizations operate extensive global humanitarian networks.
4. **Moral Authority:** Religious leaders and institutions can wield moral authority and advocate for ethical principles in international affairs. They can influence public opinion and policies by speaking out on issues such as human rights, poverty, and social justice. The Dalai Lama, for instance, is known for his advocacy of non-violence and human rights.
5. **Education and Cultural Exchanges:** Many countries with strong religious traditions offer scholarships and educational opportunities to international students to study their religious and cultural heritage. This can help build positive relationships and promote understanding between nations.
6. **Soft Diplomacy:** Some countries employ "religious diplomacy" as part of their foreign policy. They establish relationships with other nations based on shared religious values or affiliations. For example, Saudi Arabia uses its position as the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites to build influence and alliances within the Muslim world.
7. **Interfaith Dialogue:** Promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation can be a means of fostering understanding and peace between different religious communities and nations. Initiatives like the Parliament of the World's Religions bring together religious leaders and scholars to discuss common concerns and shared values.

However, it's important to note that religion can also be a source of tension and conflict in international relations, as differences in religious beliefs and practices can lead to misunderstandings and disputes. Therefore, the use of religion as soft power must be approached with sensitivity and respect for diversity.

In Indonesia, the phenomenon of the return of Islam to power politics began when Indonesia entered the era of government under the leadership of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). Changes are seen when the articulation of Islamic identity emerges and is even referred to as a new pattern in Indonesian foreign policy. In a meeting organized by the Indonesian Council on World Affairs (ICWA) on 19 May 2005 in Jakarta, which was also the inaugural speech of Indonesian foreign policy directors, President SBY said that Islamic identity would be an inherent projection in reference to the Indonesian nation (Yudhoyono, 2005, 124-125). The same thing was also expressed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Marty Natalegawa in the Group of 20 world economic forum (Group 20/G-20) who stated that as the G-20 strengthened itself as the main forum related to world economic issues, Indonesia was also faced with the challenge of positioning itself in the G-20 – namely as the third largest democracy in the world, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, and at the same time representing the voice of moderate Islam.

Based on the explanation above, this paper will specifically attempt to highlight Indonesia's seriousness in efforts to incorporate moderate Islam as its new identity in global politics after the 9/11 incident, in particular by using the interfaith dialogues. In this context, as a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia has an obligation to project the true face of Islam, namely moderate Islam (Wirajuda, 2005, 173). Strengthening moderation as the

main theme of Indonesian foreign policy is carried out by empowering moderate groups in the country as a first step, where it is stated that the success of fighting terrorism will also be determined by empowering moderates.

Method

This research is library research, namely research using various reference sources in the form of literature books, research results, government publications, journal articles, newspapers, internal institutional records, and internet sites. Based on the perspective of analysis, this research is qualitative research, which according to Jack S. Levy, the method used in international relations studies is a qualitative method. This is because the events related to the study of international relations are still closely related to historical approaches, so that the research requires analysis with in-depth explanations – one of which is through case studies – so that the research results are more scientifically detailed (Levy, 2012, 133). In this research, historical and political approaches are used in understanding Indonesia's efforts to incorporate moderate Islam, through the interfaith dialogues, as its new identity in global politics after the 9/11 tragedy.

Interfaith Dialogue in Islam

Interfaith dialogue in Islam is a process of engaging in conversations, discussions, and cooperation between followers of Islam and those of other religious traditions or worldviews. It is a way to promote understanding, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence among different faith communities. Here are some key aspects of interfaith dialogue in Islam (Dar & Sayed, 2017, 517):

1. **Quranic Foundation:** Islam's holy book, the Quran, encourages Muslims to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths. The Quran emphasizes the commonality of the Abrahamic faiths, acknowledging that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all worship the same God. It calls for peaceful coexistence and respectful engagement with people of different beliefs.
2. **Prophet Muhammad's Example:** The life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad provide a model for interfaith engagement. He interacted with people of different faiths during his lifetime and signed agreements with various non-Muslim tribes and communities, demonstrating the importance of peaceful coexistence and dialogue.
3. **Common Values and Ethics:** Interfaith dialogue often focuses on identifying common values and ethical principles shared among different faith traditions. In Islam, these may include concepts like justice, compassion, and the importance of serving humanity.
4. **Promotion of Peace:** Many Muslim scholars and leaders emphasize the role of Islam in promoting peace and denounce violence and extremism. Interfaith dialogue provides an opportunity to counter misunderstandings and misconceptions about Islam, particularly in the context of global events and conflicts.
5. **Interfaith Initiatives:** Various interfaith organizations and initiatives have been established by Muslims and non-Muslims alike to facilitate dialogue and cooperation. These initiatives often involve religious leaders, scholars, and ordinary believers from different faith backgrounds coming together to discuss issues of mutual concern.
6. **Religious Freedom:** Interfaith dialogue in Islam often includes discussions about religious freedom and the rights of individuals to practice their faith without coercion. Many Muslim scholars and organizations advocate for religious tolerance and pluralism.

7. **Challenges and Misconceptions:** Interfaith dialogue also addresses challenges and misconceptions that exist between Islam and other faiths. This may involve discussing theological differences, historical events, or contemporary issues.
8. **Local and Global Context:** Interfaith dialogue can take place at both local and global levels. Locally, it can involve community-level initiatives, while on a global scale, it may involve participation in international conferences and organizations.

It's important to note that while interfaith dialogue is encouraged in Islam, it can be a complex and sensitive process, as it involves discussions on deeply held beliefs and values. Successful interfaith dialogue requires mutual respect, open-mindedness, and a commitment to peaceful coexistence.

In recent years, many Muslim scholars and leaders have taken active roles in interfaith initiatives, seeking to build bridges of understanding and cooperation between different religious communities. These efforts contribute to promoting peace and harmony in a diverse and interconnected world.

Islam and Interfaith Dialogue in International Relations After 9/11

The events of September 11, 2001, had a profound impact on interfaith dialogue involving Islam. The 9/11 attacks brought Islam into the global spotlight, and perceptions of Islam and Muslims shifted dramatically. In the aftermath of 9/11, interfaith dialogue involving Islam faced both new challenges and opportunities (Bsoul, 2010, 71):

Challenges

1. **Negative Stereotyping:** The 9/11 attacks led to increased negative stereotyping and prejudice against Muslims. Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment became more pronounced, making it more difficult for interfaith dialogue to take place in an atmosphere of suspicion and fear.
2. **Security Concerns:** The post-9/11 world saw heightened security concerns, with governments and organizations becoming wary of engaging with Muslims and Islamic institutions. This often made it more challenging for Muslims to participate in interfaith activities.
3. **Misunderstandings:** There were widespread misunderstandings about Islam and its teachings in the wake of 9/11. Some saw Islam as inherently violent, which required substantial efforts to clarify that Islam promotes peace and condemns acts of terrorism.

Opportunities

1. **Interfaith Solidarity:** Many individuals and groups from various faith backgrounds showed solidarity with Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11. They condemned the attacks and reached out to Muslim communities, creating opportunities for dialogue and cooperation.
2. **Education and Awareness:** The need to address misconceptions about Islam led to an increase in educational efforts. Interfaith organizations and Muslim communities worked to educate the public about the true teachings of Islam, emphasizing its commitment to peace and tolerance.
3. **Interfaith Initiatives:** The post-9/11 period saw the growth of interfaith initiatives and organizations dedicated to promoting dialogue and understanding. These initiatives aimed to foster positive relationships among people of different faiths and combat religious bigotry.
4. **Religious Leadership:** Many religious leaders, including Muslim scholars, took active roles in interfaith dialogue. They used their platforms to promote peace and cooperation among different religious communities, emphasizing the common values shared among faiths.

5. **Global Engagement:** The international community recognized the importance of interfaith dialogue in countering extremism and promoting peace. This led to the formation of interfaith initiatives at the global level, involving religious leaders, scholars, and organizations from various countries.
6. **Policy Advocacy:** Muslim advocacy groups and organizations worked to influence policies that promoted religious freedom, tolerance, and the protection of civil rights for Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11. This advocacy contributed to creating a more conducive environment for interfaith dialogue.

In summary, while the events of 9/11 posed significant challenges to interfaith dialogue involving Islam, they also presented opportunities for greater understanding, cooperation, and solidarity among people of different faiths. Efforts to combat misconceptions, educate the public, and promote peace have been ongoing, and many individuals and organizations remain committed to fostering positive interfaith relations in the post-9/11 world.

Islam, Interfaith Dialogue, and Indonesia Foreign Policy

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, has a unique approach to interfaith dialogue as part of its foreign policy. The country's foreign policy has been guided by the principles of "Pancasila" and "Musyawarah Mufakat," which emphasize unity, diversity, and consensus-building (Al-Anshori, 2016, 59).

While "Moderate Islam" in Indonesia can indeed be considered a form of soft power that the country wields in international relations. Indonesia's brand of moderate Islam is characterized by its inclusive and pluralistic approach to religion and society. Here's how moderate Islam in Indonesia functions as a form of soft power (Jubba, 2021, 47):

1. **Model of Religious Pluralism:** Indonesia is often seen as a model of religious pluralism, where various religious and cultural groups coexist peacefully. The practice of moderate Islam in the country reflects a commitment to tolerance, diversity, and inclusivity. As a result, Indonesia's approach to religious pluralism serves as an example for other countries with diverse religious populations.
2. **Counterterrorism and Counterextremism:** Indonesia's moderate Islamic approach has been instrumental in countering terrorism and extremism. The country has successfully confronted radical elements by promoting a more tolerant interpretation of Islam. This approach is attractive to other nations grappling with radicalization issues, and Indonesia can share its expertise in countering extremism through soft power channels.
3. **Interfaith Dialogue and Peace Building:** Indonesia actively engages in interfaith dialogue and peace-building initiatives on both the regional and global levels. Its moderate Islamic stance facilitates collaboration with other countries and organizations to address religious conflicts and promote peaceful coexistence. Indonesia's efforts in this area contribute to its soft power by positioning it as a peacemaker and mediator.
4. **Cultural Diplomacy:** Indonesia's cultural diplomacy often includes the promotion of its moderate Islamic values. Through cultural exchanges, educational programs, and international events, Indonesia showcases its diverse and inclusive interpretation of Islam, which can foster a positive image of the country abroad.
5. **Humanitarian and Development Initiatives:** Indonesia, as a moderate Islamic nation, is active in humanitarian and development efforts, both domestically and internationally. These efforts often emphasize principles of social justice, charity (zakat), and community welfare, which align with the values of moderate Islam. Such initiatives enhance Indonesia's soft power by demonstrating its commitment to global well-being.

6. Economic and Trade Relations: Indonesia's moderate Islamic identity can be a soft power asset in its economic and trade relations with Muslim-majority countries and regions. It can build stronger economic partnerships based on shared cultural and religious values.
7. Promotion of Democracy: Indonesia's successful transition to democracy and its maintenance of democratic principles within a predominantly Muslim society can serve as a soft power tool. It can inspire other Muslim-majority nations to pursue democratic reforms and practices while preserving their cultural and religious identities.

In summary, Indonesia's moderate Islam serves as a form of soft power by promoting tolerance, diversity, peace, and inclusivity. This approach enhances the country's international image and enables it to exert influence on the global stage by offering solutions to religious and social challenges faced by many countries. Indonesia's soft power can be a valuable asset in diplomacy, economic relations, and efforts to build a more peaceful and harmonious world.

Conclusion

Islam and interfaith dialogue are significant components of Indonesia's soft power in international relations. Indonesia, with its diverse population and the world's largest Muslim population, has used these elements strategically to enhance its global influence. In this context, Islam and interfaith dialogue are important for Indonesia's soft power, based on arguments that Indonesia's unique brand of Islam emphasizes religious diversity and tolerance. This approach showcases Indonesia as a nation where various religious and cultural groups can coexist peacefully. This inclusive stance resonates with countries and regions facing religious diversity challenges, enhancing Indonesia's soft power. Indonesia also has successfully countered radicalism and terrorism by promoting a moderate and tolerant interpretation of Islam. Its experience in dealing with extremist threats and deradicalization efforts can serve as a model for other nations. This positions Indonesia as a trusted partner in international counterterrorism efforts, bolstering its soft power.

There is also fact that Indonesia actively engages in interfaith dialogue and peace-building initiatives on both regional and global levels. As a moderate Islamic nation, it can play a crucial role in mediating religious conflicts and fostering peace. Its involvement in such initiatives enhances its image as a peacemaker and strengthens its diplomatic influence. In conclusion, Indonesia's strategic use of Islam and interfaith dialogue in its foreign policy and international relations contributes significantly to its soft power. These elements not only define its national identity but also position Indonesia as a valuable partner in addressing global challenges related to religion, tolerance, peace, and development. Indonesia's soft power in these areas enhances its ability to exert influence and build strong diplomatic and economic relationships with countries worldwide.

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Biography

Rizki Damayanti is a Permanent Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, Universitas Paramadina, Jakarta, and a Doctor of Islamic Studies (Concentration: Islam and International Relations) from the Graduate School of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta.

CERTIFICATE

This is to Certify that

DR. RIZKI DAMAYANTI, MA

This is to certify that **Dr. Rizki Damayanti, MA** has honorably presented at the International Conference of Interreligious Studies, Sciences, and Technology. The conference theme was **“Religion (still) Matters: Navigating The Relevance of Religion Across the Issue of Environment, Renewable Technology, Artificial Intelligence and Social Inclusion”**. Dr. Rizki Damayanti, MA has significantly contributed to the discourse of the conference through her insightful presentation about “Religion as Soft Power in International Relations: Islam, Interfaith Dialogue, and Indonesia Foreign Policy” and active her participation in the sessions held from November 6 to November 8, 2023, at Discovery Ancol, Jakarta.

Conference Chairperson:



Prof. Amelia Fauzia MA Ph.D