

**Overlooking the Oppression of Uyghur Muslims:
Unfavorable Domestic Politics and the ‘Deactivation’ of
Indonesia’s Islamic Diplomacy**

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine whether Islam remains relevant in determining diplomatic initiatives in the current geopolitical environment. Thus, it presumes that Muslim states have Islamic tendencies in their foreign policy, but seeks to understand when and under what conditions such Islamic diplomacy is activated. In order to explore these questions, I will examine the case of the oppressed of Uyghur Muslims. Despite widespread coverage highlighting serious human rights violations targeting Uyghur Muslims, Muslim states have taken nuanced, cautious stances and in some cases remained silent. This is a slightly unexpected stance with regards to such a high-profile case of oppression of Muslims.

Academic literature overemphasizes strong state partnerships, economic dependencies, and China’s significant role in international affairs as factors constraining Muslim states in activating Islamic diplomacy with regards to Uyghur Muslims. Utilizing the ‘two-level games’ framework and focusing on a single-country case study – Indonesia under Joko Widodo – this article argues that a combination of the geopolitical environment and unfavorable domestic politics have resulted in the deactivation of Islamic diplomacy on the Uyghur issue. The increasing consolidation of power during the second term of Widodo’s administration led to the decline of political Islam, referring to the declining role of formal and informal Islamic actors in domestic politics, which in turn, weakened Islamic groups’ demands for the activation of Islamic diplomacy on the Uyghur issue.

Keywords: Islamic Diplomacy, Uyghur Muslim, Two-Level Games, Oppressed Muslim

Introduction

A plethora of academic papers, research reports, and media articles have highlighted that Uyghur Muslims are being oppressed through the misuse of anti-terrorism and counter-extremism policies in the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in north-western China (Bovingdon, 2010; Garciandía Igal, 2023; Idris, 2023; Kanat, 2016; OHCHR, 2022; Ruser et al., 2020). But why have Muslim states taken a subdued diplomatic stance in response to this oppression of Muslims? Most of the literature argues that strong state partnerships and China's significant role in geopolitics are the main factors that explain the cautious responses and silence from Muslim states (Idris, 2023; Jardine, 2022; Rakhmat, 2022b; Yıldırım, 2023). While, this is conceivable, it cannot adequately explain why some other countries, despite their strong state partnerships with China, are able to take meaningful diplomatic stances on this issue. For example, Malaysia, under the second administration of Mahathir Muhammad (2018-2020), rejected a request from Beijing to extradite Uyghurs in Malaysia back to Xinjiang (Reuters, 2018).

Indonesia, meanwhile, has been quietly extraditing Uyghurs, especially those allegedly involved in terrorist activities (Nirmala, 2020). But, in one instance, Indonesia launched diplomatic efforts to seek a resolution to concerns about the Uyghur. Retno Marsudi said Indonesia had not been silent on the Uyghur issue; instead, the country had sought to establish contact with the Chinese government on the issue (KumparanNEWS, 2019c). Furthermore, given Indonesia's historical involvement in Islamic diplomacy, it would be reasonable to expect that Jakarta would engage and offer meaningful diplomatic initiatives on this issue. As this article outlines further, Indonesia displayed substantial concern for the Uyghurs between 2017 and 2019, but this slightly declined from 2019 onwards. This contrasts with other analyses that argue Indonesia has been completely silent on the Uyghur issue (Emont, 2019; IPAC, 2019).

This article seeks to advance an explanation that addresses the role of domestic politics leading to the deactivation of Islamic diplomacy regarding the Uyghur issue. In this sense, the domestic political environment plays a key role in driving and spurring the state's reaction to international issues concerning the Islamic world and Muslim societies,

especially instances of oppression against Muslims beyond an individual country's borders. As I will elaborate further, Indonesia has sought to utilize Islam as a form of soft power, such as the promotion of moderate Islam in support of the global war on terror (Umar, 2016) and promoting halal lifestyles by leveraging global halal trends (Fithriana, 2019). Indonesia has also engaged in the peace processes for conflicts involving Muslims for the purpose of seeking recognition as a leading power among Muslim-majority states (Anwar, 2010; Karim, 2021).

In order to provide evidence for this argument, my research relies on qualitative methods and utilizes the process tracing technique. Ricks and Liu argue that process tracing “involves rigor and attention to detail and logic of causal inference similar to that of a detective or a medical examiner” (Ricks & Liu, 2018, p. 826). This suggests that in examining the Indonesian government's cautious response to the oppression of Uyghur Muslims, we must determine the symptoms or early evidence for why this approach has been taken. The barren state of political Islam, exemplified by the declining role of Islamic political parties and social organizations, may serve as a reason for the government's silence on oppressed Muslims. I will attempt to focus on the factors that drive the exclusion of Islam as a major consideration in Indonesia's diplomacy on the issue of oppressed Muslims.

Analyzing these symptoms will rely on primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through interviews with several representatives from Indonesian Islamic organizations and Uyghur activists in person and online.¹ Online news articles, documents, and digital interviews are also recognized as primary sources as long as the content is original, for instance, the statements of politicians, activists, and decision-makers related to Uyghur issues or original documents from Uyghur organizations. I also utilize secondary sources, like academic articles, online news articles, or research reports from third-party organizations. Furthermore, diving into digital archives assists in analyzing fluctuating trends around the Uyghur issue in Indonesian public discourse. To explore these archives, I utilize basic analytical tools in

¹ The names of the interview participants are not mentioned, especially regarding information that could negatively affect other personnel, institutions, or governments.

Google's search engine to assess the trajectory of public discussion on Uyghur issues in Indonesia. I utilize specific phrases such as "*Bela Islam*" (defending Islam), "*Bela Uighur*" (defending the Uyghurs) and "*Bela Rohingya*" (defending the Rohingya) to illustrate trends.

This article is organized as follows: First, it analyzes the theoretical basis for understanding the influence of domestic politics on state diplomatic initiatives. Second, it offers a concise summary of the oppression of Uyghur Muslims and the responses of Muslim-majority states. Third, it examines the circumstances that led to the activation of Islamic diplomacy in the Indonesian context. Ultimately, it provides a comprehensive examination for how domestic political factors influence Indonesia's diplomatic strategies towards Uyghur-related issues.

Domestic Politics and Islamic Diplomacy

As in other states, the behavior of Muslim-majority states in the international realm has its roots in events at home. The national interest and domestic considerations remain major determinants in formulating foreign policy and diplomatic efforts. While this has been neglected in the study of international relations for a long time, Robert Putnam (1988) formulated his influential theory of two-level games. While Putnam's work is a kind of 'technical guide' for negotiators in international affairs, the logic of the interaction between the domestic and international considerations in producing a state's foreign policy is useful for framing the logic of analysis for the state's response toward international issues (Putnam, 1988). Indeed, these two levels are intertwined, but further discussion will focus on one level: the role of domestic constituencies in driving the state's response to international issues. This does not ignore international factors' influence on domestic issues, as this article also includes discussion of the US-China rivalry and other factors that determine Muslim states' responses to the Uyghur Muslim issue.

As Putnam explains: "At the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own

ability to satisfy domestic pressures while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments” (Putnam, 1988, p. 434). This suggests decisions are arrived at by balancing both domestic and international considerations; this becomes even more relevant in today’s interconnected and interdependent states. In Indonesia, it is presumed that diplomatic efforts, especially those concerning international issues relating to the Islamic world and Muslim communities, are shaped by the demands of domestic Islamic groups. The more aggressive these demands, the more significant their impact on the state’s diplomatic response to a particular issue. The subsequent chapter will illustrate that Indonesia’s diplomatic initiatives respond to Muslim issues only after being subjected to substantial pressure.

However, before delving into a more detailed examination, it is essential to provide a working definition for the term ‘Islamic diplomacy’ used throughout this article. This term refers to diplomacy influenced by Islamic norms, principles, and values, which shape the diplomatic strategies and conduct of the state. This concept encompasses various activities, including the enhancement of bilateral and multilateral relations with Muslim nations, employing Islam as an instrument of diplomacy, and formulating foreign policy that considers the interests of fellow Muslims beyond national boundaries. Examples relating to the last kind of activity include Iran’s military assistance for Bosnian Muslims and Malaysia’s open border policy for Bosnian refugees during the Yugoslavia conflict.

We should also consider the case of Buddhism to illustrate that religious politics and diplomacy are not unique to Islam but rather reflect the experiences of various religions, particularly in post-colonial nations, where religion acts as a significant catalyst for burgeoning nationalistic sentiment against colonial powers. Buddhism, for example, has influenced the domestic and foreign policies of countries such as Cambodia, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. For another example, we can consider the recent construction of a Hindu temple in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a component of India’s diplomacy. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the leader of the conservative Hindutva Party in India, presided over the inauguration of this new temple (Mogul, 2024).

The concept of Islamic diplomacy can be expansive and ambiguous. A non-Muslim state may engage in Islamic diplomacy to a certain degree if it employs Islamic values and serves the interests of Muslims. For example, the Chinese government has undertaken initiatives to use Islam and Muslims in fostering diplomatic relations with Arab states (Wang, 2018). Another example is the Chinese government's diplomatic initiatives with non-state entities in Indonesia, such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah (Rakhmat, 2022a). Nonetheless, I will flag this point only as an additional avenue for research for now. In the next section I will provide a succinct assessment of the Uyghur issue and Muslim states' nuanced response to it.

Oppression of Uyghur Muslims and Muslim States' Response

Case Overview

Numerous extensive reports, academic studies, and feature articles have highlighted alleged human rights violations against Uyghur Muslims and Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang, in the north-west of the People's Republic of China (PRC). While this issue has roots in the longstanding conflict between Uyghurs and the Chinese authorities (Bovingdon, 2010), it re-emerged in 2017 when the Chinese government intensified its new campaign of 're-education' targeting Muslims across the Xinjiang region. This campaign was framed as a counter-terrorist and counter-separatist initiative. Therefore, it was promoted as a law enforcement activity instead of violating human rights, in accordance with statements by Chinese officials. However, this view differed from the findings of several analysts. The Chinese Government's Uyghur policy was launched in early 2014, with the Center for Uyghur Studies (CUS) referring to it as a "Genocidal policy" against Uyghurs since it aimed to erode the cultural, religious, and linguistic aspects of the Uyghur community (CUS, 2024). Nathan Rusher of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) utilized satellite imagery to build a dataset comparing the situation in Xinjiang before and after 2017, when the "re-education" program began in the region. Rusher focused on religious sites, especially mosques, identifying that 900 such sites existed before 2017, including 533 mosques. But after

cross-checking in 2019-2020, Ruser found that Islamic-style architectural features (domes and minarets) had been removed from many mosques (Ruser et al., 2020, pp. 5–6).

At least two reports from foreign organizations documented significant human rights violations against Muslims in Xinjiang. The reports originated from, initially, the findings of an evaluation performed by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR). This comprehensive evaluation determined that “serious human rights violations have been perpetrated in XUAR in relation to the Government’s implementation of counterterrorism and counter-extremism strategies” (OHCHR, 2022, p. 43). This research revealed instances of imprisonment and other forms of deprivation of liberty, specifically the limiting of religious and cultural expression. Additionally, this research highlighted instances of intimidation, threats, family separations, and enforced disappearances of targeted individuals.

A second report presented findings from a comprehensive study by Ruser (2020), indicating that the Chinese government's 're-education' program had evolved into a detention center for Uyghurs and Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. This investigation refuted assertions by Chinese officials that all “trainees” from the alleged vocational training facilities had “graduated” by the end of 2019. Evidence indicated that several extrajudicial detainees under Xinjiang’s extensive “re-education” system were now being officially charged and incarcerated in higher-security facilities, including newly-constructed or expanded jails, or dispatched to enclosed factory complexes for forced labor assignments. (Ruser et al., 2020).

In light of these comprehensive reports demonstrating significant human rights violations against Muslims in Xinjiang, it was unusual that Muslim-majority nations did not react in accordance with internal pressures. In democratic Muslim nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey, the oppression of Muslims internationally often incites vigorous grassroots responses. However, the response to the Uyghur issue has been remarkably subdued. Multiple causes may account for this, including democratic regression and increased limitations on freedom of expression in certain countries, which is a result of increased government consolidation of power in those countries.

Muslim States' responses

Muslim-majority nations have faced considerable criticism for their unexpectedly subdued responses to purported human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. The phrase 'Muslim states' is employed broadly to denote nations that officially recognize Islam as the basis of governance, including Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and various Middle Eastern countries, as well as those with Muslim-majority populations where Islam significantly influences domestic and foreign policy, such as Indonesia, Syria, and Turkey. From a constructivist perspective, the collective values, norms, and beliefs inherent in Islam should ostensibly shape Indonesia's position and stance in advocating for Uyghur interests (Menchik, 2017; Nair, 2013; Sukma, 2006; Mandaville, 2003). During other crises involving Muslims, such as those in Palestine and Myanmar, Indonesia adopted a proactive and forceful stance by addressing these matters in diplomatic and multilateral arenas (Abdul Rahman & Baihaqie, 2017; Murphy, 2020; Smith & Williams, 2021). Nevertheless, Muslim-majority nations have exhibited remarkable reluctance to engage on the Uyghur issue or have otherwise taken a position of outright silence (Aryo, 2020; Rakhmat, 2022b).

A wide range of studies have investigated the subdued attitudes of Muslim-majority nations on the Uyghur issue. Many of these studies contend that strong government-to-government relationships and economic concerns are the principal determinants for these states' prudent behavior. Bradley Jardine emphasizes that at least six Muslim nations—Egypt, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the UAE—have offered not only verbal support for China's policy but have also extradited Uyghurs to China (Jardine 2022). Similarly, Yıldırım (2023) contends that Turkey's reticence over the Uyghur issue is motivated by the government's belief that a robust alliance with China may foster economic development alongside the government's increasing anti-American rhetoric (Yıldırım, 2023). But Indonesia's situation is more intricate, if not more complicated, necessitating a wider view.

The profound partnership between Indonesia and China cannot be entirely ascribed to the strength of their bilateral relationship. Indonesia,

recognized as one of the most democratic nations globally, is shaped by internal political forces that influence its foreign policy. This contrasts with several Arab-Muslim nations, which are primarily authoritarian, where foreign policy decisions are centered in administrative authority and frequently overlook public sentiment. Yildirim (2023) demonstrates that the government's silence in Turkey is due to the co-optation of power under the authoritarian regime. It is important to acknowledge that the situation is not absolute; these states exhibit a great deal of variety in their use of religious soft power during geopolitical battles, influenced to some degree by the prevailing domestic circumstances.

A comprehensive report by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) highlights several factors contributing to Indonesia's muted response to the Uyghur issue, which extends beyond purely economic considerations. One key aspect is Indonesia's nuanced approach to this issue: while the international community, particularly the West, frames the Uyghur issue as a case of human rights violation warranting global intervention, Indonesia sees the conflict as a domestic matter, thus limiting its engagement and ruling out any direct intervention (IPAC, 2019).

The Activation of Islamic Diplomacy: Islam as Religious Soft Power and the Currency Domestic Politics

This section aims to analyze the 'deactivation' of Islamic diplomacy in Indonesia's response to the Uyghur issue. The initial question to address is when and under what conditions 'activation' occurs. I argue that Islam actively functions as both a tool of religious soft power and a form of currency in domestic politics. This political currency is often linked to the rise of political Islam, which, in turn, facilitates the development of Islamic diplomatic initiatives. This highlights the importance of applying Putnam's two-level games theory to analyze political phenomena that consider the interaction between foreign and domestic factors shaping a state's diplomatic efforts. This section will examine the use of Islam as Indonesia's religious soft power to illustrate the activation of Islamic diplomacy.

Islam as Indonesia's Religious Soft-Power

Indonesia's use of Islam as a religious form of soft power is fundamentally based on Joseph Nye's (2004) notion of soft power, which denotes a state's capacity to influence the preferences of other states without using hard power, such as military force or economic coercion (Nye, 2004, p. 5). Nye's study did not focus on religion as a source of soft power; however, Mandaville (2023) posited that religion serves as a key source of soft power for states, particularly those where religion plays a considerable role in political affairs. Mandaville posits that in transitioning to a "post-Western" world, certain states can utilize alternative sources of soft power, notably religion, to cultivate and maintain geopolitically advantageous relationships with global audiences (Mandaville, 2023, p. 7).

Indonesia's foreign policy is fundamentally anchored in being "free and active," which guides its diplomatic endeavors. Dewi Fortuna Anwar (1994) clarifies that "free" is typically interpreted as non-participation in military alliances or defense agreements; however, it does not inherently imply neutrality or passivity. Conversely, "active" signifies engagement in the struggle against colonialism and the promotion of global peace, establishing an obligation for Indonesia to adopt an activist foreign policy" (Anwar, 1994, pp. 146–147). In this regard, many studies note that Islam does not fundamentally dictate Indonesia's foreign policy (Anwar, 1994; Sukma, 2006). However, it has been symbolically employed as a diplomatic instrument in international affairs, particularly following the September 11 terrorist attacks (Anwar, 2010; Hoesterey, 2023; Seeth, 2023; Ubaedillah et al., 2022; Umar, 2016). This article views the Islam as a form of religious soft power, specifically through the activation of Islamic diplomacy, even though it is considered by some to be merely symbolic rather than substantive (Sukma, 2006, p. 140).

Indonesia's promotion of moderate Islam, the compatibility of Islam with democracy, and the encouragement of interfaith dialogue exemplify the utilization of Islam as a kind of religious soft power in geopolitical competition. This utilization of religion has become prevalent and mainstream in international politics, particularly since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the conclusion of the Cold War in 1991. This

phenomenon was triggered by two significant events that influenced the discourse on religion in global politics: the Yugoslavia civil war in the early 1990s, followed by the September 11 attacks in 2001. The two events featured religion as a central issue, elevating it to a prominent topic of discourse. (Mandaville, 2023, p. 3; Mirilovic, 2019).

Indonesia, as a regional leader, has consistently pursued worldwide recognition as an emerging power. Religion represents the primary source of its soft power, as it is the most populous Muslim nation and the third-largest democracy in the world. Moreover, Indonesia is a prominent state within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a coalition of nations that fundamentally eschews armed confrontation. Consequently, Indonesia has effectively employed Islam in its engagement with external institutions to address and contribute to international discourse, not only on Islamic matters but also broader issues, such as in the economy by capitalizing on the halal food industry as a component of public diplomatic strategies, albeit in ways which remain limited in scope (Fithriana, 2019).

The use of Islam as a form of soft power is largely contingent upon aligning with the needs of domestic constituencies (Waikar et al., 2021). Initiatives such as promoting moderate Islam or the international halal movement mirror the expectations of domestic constituents, particularly Islamic organizations. Indonesia's diplomatic initiatives on crises affecting Muslims, such as those in Palestine and Myanmar, have been profoundly shaped by the robust advocacy of local Islamic activists. In the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar, grassroots support in Indonesia diminished after the arrival of large numbers of Rohingya refugees, resulting in extensive protests against the group.

Political Islam and Currency of Domestic Politics

This section will illustrate the degree to which the domestic political landscape supports the implementation of Islamic diplomacy. It argues that a conducive domestic environment benefits the expansion of Islamic diplomacy. In this regard, this article shows that, to some extent, the growing influence of political Islam in domestic politics leads to the

articulation of Islam in foreign policy. Political Islam is used here to refer to a common framework related to the mobilization of Islam for political ends. This aligns with concepts like Islamic activism (Arifianto, 2020; Liow, 2022; Wiktorowicz, 2004) and Islamic resurgence (Formichi, 2012, 2020, p. 190), in which Islam serves as a political tool in the domestic context to challenge ruling governments to impose 'Islamic values' in policymaking. The term political Islam denotes the use of Islamic narratives for political purposes, typically orchestrated by Islamic groups. Regarding diplomatic initiatives and foreign policy, as Sukma (2003) noted, these efforts are not intended to establish and implement an exclusively Islamic foreign policy. Instead, they seek to cultivate relationships with Muslim states, address the concerns of the Islamic world and, more importantly, take significant action on issues affecting Muslim societies, particularly those experiencing crises, conflict, or vulnerabilities (Sukma, 2006, p. 53).

Historically, the broader literature suggests that Islam has not played a substantial role in determining Indonesia's foreign policy, which has instead been shaped mostly by nationalist ideology and anti-colonial narratives (Sukma, 2006). However, Kevin Fogg (2015) highlighted the significant role Islam played in Indonesia's foreign policy after independence, particularly through societal groups. Fogg demonstrates that the concept of Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwah Islamiyah*) was a key narrative in Indonesia's diplomatic outreach to Middle Eastern leaders, helping to build early alliances that led to the recognition of Indonesia as an independent state. Islamic brotherhood motivated influential figures, such as Dr. Hafiz Afifi Pasha, a former Egyptian ambassador to London, to lobby on behalf of Indonesia at a United Nations meeting in Great Britain in 1946. This effort, motivated by shared religious identity, played a crucial role in garnering international support for Indonesia's independence (Fogg, 2015, pp. 311–315).

Under the administrations of BJ Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and later Megawati Soekarnoputri, Indonesia underwent a crucial transition from authoritarianism to democracy, which provided greater space for the rise of political Islam. This transition coincided with the events of September 11, which significantly reshaped the relationship between Islam and the

Western world. The aftermath of these events led to heightened tensions, particularly following the U.S. 'war on terror,' which primarily targeted Muslim-majority states in the Middle East and across Asia, further intensifying global tensions between the two sides. During this period, Indonesia's domestic context saw the growing influence of political Islam: the massive spread of transnational Islam and opportunities for Islam to insert itself into Indonesian national politics (Sukma, 2006, p. 65).

Vinsensio Dugis (2017) contends that the rise of political Islam, exemplified by widespread protests in response to the US war in Afghanistan, constrained Indonesia's ability to produce a pro-US foreign policy, as initially planned, in the Post-Reformasi era. At the time, Indonesia relied somewhat heavily on the US, as Megawati attempted to revive strong relations with the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), both of which were influenced significantly by the US. However, Indonesia was unable to adopt a firm stance against the US, as doing so could have potentially led to political instability (Dugis, 2017).

In a similar vein, SBY's administration coincided with the emergence of various conflicts affecting Muslim communities around the world, including in Southeast Asia. The government's response often reflected the demands of Islamic groups and activists, particularly in shaping its diplomatic efforts. As Karim (2021) argued, Indonesia under SBY emphasized its position as a regional leader, a voice for developing countries, an advocate of democracy and a bridge-builder. In this sense, as Karim emphasized, "the domestic audience will always remain key audiences for the state in enacting role conceptions, particularly in democracies" (Karim, 2021, p. 12). As part of Indonesia's democratic and bridge-building efforts, Anwar noted SBY's administration sought to shape Indonesia's international identity in such a way that "Islam, democracy, and modernity can go hand in hand" (Anwar, 2010).

Unfavorable Domestic Political Environment and the ‘Deactivation’ of Islamic Diplomacy

In this section, I will focus on the degree to which Indonesia ‘deactivated’ its Islamic diplomacy. First, I will outline the decline of political Islam, arguing that this can be attributed to power consolidation by the state, particularly during the second term of Widodo’s administration. Second, I explain how the declining role of political Islam in domestic politics contributed to the deactivation of Islamic diplomacy.

Power Consolidation and the Decline of Political Islam

In this context, political Islam is used interchangeably with Islamic activism, which refers to the use of Islamic narratives for political purposes. Political Islam can manifest in a formal sense, such as through Islamic-based political parties, or informally through social movements. This article will focus on informal expressions of political Islam, which continue to play a significant role in Indonesia's political landscape. As outlined by Joseph Liow (2022), Islamic social movements have had a significant impact on Indonesian politics since the late 1960s and have particularly shaped domestic politics after the fall of Suharto, particularly through the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood-inspired *Tarbiyah* Movement (Liow, 2022, pp. 48–49).

Many Islamic civil society groups have played a significant role in the emergence of informal political Islam. Some of these Islamic organizations, including the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Wahdah Islamiyah (WI), and Hidayatulloh were established in post-reform period. These organizations served as the main catalyst for the emergence of the Islamic political movement seeking to promote Sharia-oriented policies in post-Suharto Indonesia. Examples of their political activism include the influential 2017 Defend Islam Movement (ABI) in Jakarta, which inspired parallel protests throughout Indonesia (Vermonte et al., 2020). Remnants from this movement persisted and influenced the 2019 presidential election, fostering an increase in identity politics and exacerbating political polarization (Hanan, 2020).

The 2019 election is seen as a key juncture in the decline of Islamic activism in Indonesia. Beginning in 2019, several indicators pointed to a decline in Islamic activism, driven by a strengthening of top-down power consolidation by the state. This consolidation saw Islamic activists coerced and coopted under the government. Coercive measures targeted Islamist groups and actors, including the banning of FPI and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the criminalization of and restrictions placed on key figures such as Habib Rizieq and other FPI leaders (Suryana, 2024). Moderate Islamic groups were also coopted. Widodo's selection of NU cleric Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate in the 2019 election was seen as an attempt to strengthen his image as a defender of moderate Islam while sidelining hardline Islamic groups (Arifianto, 2020, pp. 127–128; Sitepu, 2018).

The declining role of political Islam in Indonesian domestic politics has been extensively analyzed by A'an Suryana and Syafiq Hasyim. Suryana (2024) argued that Islamist figures did not play a significant role during the 2024 election; in stark contrast to the 2019 election, where they were central to the campaign. He identified at least three factors behind this decline: repression under Widodo, shifting political alliances, and a fragmented political base (Suryana, 2024). Hasyim noted the shifting views of Political Islam in the Indonesian public sphere away from being purely politically-oriented, such as advocating for the imposition of Sharia-based policies, to an Islamic lifestyle orientation, a 'softer form of Islamization', like the use of Sharia banks and the growing trend of Halal Lifestyle. According to Hasyim, this shift reflects the diminishing influence of Islamist organizations over the past decade (Hasyim, 2023).

The Deactivation of Islamic Diplomacy on the Uyghur Muslim Issue

How can such an unfavorable domestic political environment for political Islam lead to the state disregarding Islamic ideals in its diplomatic agenda? This section demonstrates how the decline of Islamic activism reduced pressure on the government to demonstrate public support for Uyghur Muslims. In line with the overarching effects of power consolidation that weakened Islamic engagement, levels of support for

Uyghurs declined markedly post-2019. As pointed out in Figure 1 and Figure 2, before 2019, the domestic political environment was more favorable to political Islam, which facilitated the activation of Islamic diplomacy. During this period, Indonesia made various efforts to engage with the Uyghur issue. For example, the foreign minister asserted several times that “Indonesia is not silent on the Uyghur issue” and undertook soft diplomacy efforts in support of this stance, such as summoning the Chinese Ambassador to Indonesia to clarify the situation in Xinjiang (KumparanNEWS, 2019c). Indonesian ulema from Islamic organizations were also sent to China to assess conditions in Xinjiang. Furthermore, Vice President Jusuf Kalla, who was well-known as an international Muslim activist, displayed his concern by directing the Indonesian Ambassador in China to visit Xinjiang (Wapres RI, 2018). Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs Mahfud MD also said ‘we cannot remain silent on the Uyghur issue’, confirming that the Foreign Minister had taken diplomatic initiatives in a soft, non-confrontational manner (Tempo, 2019). Members of parliament also attempted to propose a draft resolution on the Uyghur issue during the 2019 Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States (PUIC) conference in Rabat, Morrocco. However, this proposal was rejected on procedural grounds (DPR RI, 2019).

	2018-2019	2020-2024
Domestic Politics	Favorable <i>Growing political Islam</i>	Unfavorable <i>Declining political Islam</i>
Islamic Diplomacy	Activated <i>Substantial attempts to support resolution</i>	Deactivated <i>Abandoning Muslim crises</i>

Figure 1. Domestic Politics and Islamic Diplomacy

The timing of these statements reveals they were made in response to growing Islamic activism that pressured the government to take a firm stance on the Uyghur issue. This activism was driven by Islamic organizations, influential Muslim figures, and opposition groups. Between 2018 and 2019, large-scale rallies on the Uyghur issue were held outside the Chinese Embassy in Jakarta, which also inspired demonstrations in several other cities across Indonesia. These demonstrations were fueled by renewed public awareness concerning the oppression of Uyghur Muslims, which mobilized support and advocacy efforts led by prominent Islamic organizations such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Wahdah Islamiyah, Hidayatullah, Al Irsyad Al Islamiyah, and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) (Antara, 2018; Gunawan, 2018; Kompas, 2018; Panjimas, 2018). For many Indonesian Muslims, the oppression of the Uyghur Muslims was seen as equivalent to the oppression of Islam itself.

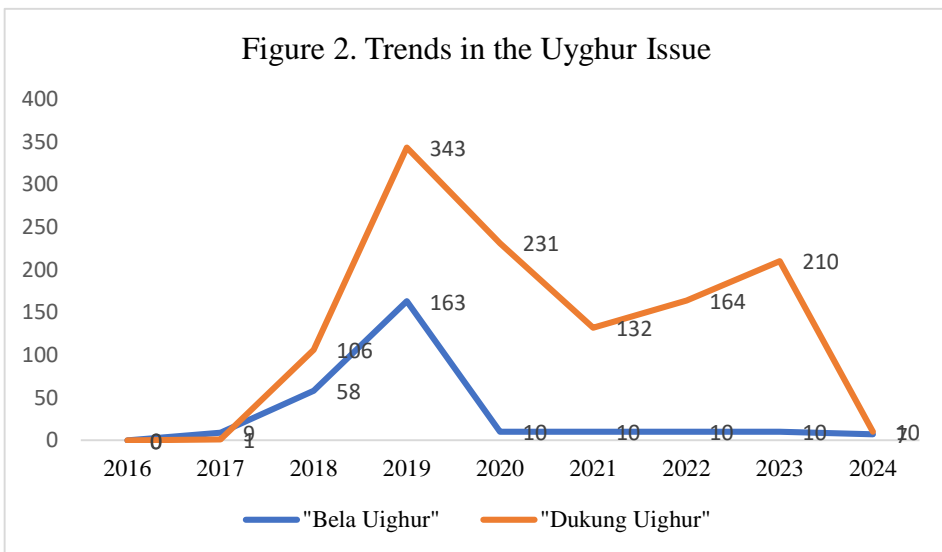
During this period, Islamic organizations, Islamic social and political organizations, and influential Muslim figures adopted an assertive stance in response to the oppression of the Uyghurs. There was significant pressure from Islamic factions calling on the government to undertake enhanced diplomatic measures over the Uyghur situation. Opposition groups exploited this issue, arguing that the Widodo administration was constrained by its dependency on Chinese debt, which impeded its ability to adequately respond to the situation. Anwar Abbas, the Secretary-General of the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) and a prominent scholar in Muhammadiyah, criticized the government's lack of diplomatic action on the Uyghur issue, asserting that it demonstrated a failure to fulfill constitutional obligations (KumparanNEWS, 2019b). His statement was a direct response to the Presidential Chief of Staff, Moeldoko. According to an official media release from the Presidential Staff Office, Moeldoko said that the Uyghur issue was an internal matter for China and added that, amid rapid advances in technology, the government frequently encountered the challenge of misinformation (KSP, 2019). Several government representatives also expressed skepticism about the reliability of information regarding the Uyghur situation, describing it as ambiguous and unclear. Din Syamsuddin, the former Chairman of Muhammadiyah and a member of the MUI Advisory Board, proposed the

establishment of a fact-finding committee to clarify the situation and very reports of human rights violations (KumparanNEWS, 2019a).

Several Muslim leaders criticized Indonesia's initiatives on the Uyghur issue as being largely normative and falling short of expectations, suggesting that the government could have at least elevated the matter in international forums. However, the government's efforts to reassure domestic constituents that it was taking action deserve at least some recognition, given the high expectations placed on it. The government's response was at least partly justifiable, considering Indonesia's position as a Muslim-majority nation, its robust relationship with China, and the confusing information available at the time. Furthermore, Indonesia's response appeared more forceful compared to other Muslim nations with strong government-to-government partnerships with China, such as Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and six Arab countries — Egypt, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. These countries explicitly supported China's counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policies against the Uyghurs. (Idris, 2023; Jardine, 2022). Indonesia's stance over the past five years can be understood as a consequence of a decline in Islamic activism. As this article has demonstrated, the diminishing role of political Islam in domestic politics has reduced the likelihood of Islam being a significant consideration in responding to international controversies. This decline continued during the second term of Widodo's presidency as he utilized twin strategies of co-optation and coercion against Islamist groups (Arifianto, 2020, p. 127).

Figure 2 depicts the trends in Indonesian internet news coverage of the Uyghur issues over the past decade. This data shows that narratives on the Uyghurs, particularly 'defending the Uyghurs' (*bela Uighur*) and 'supporting the Uyghurs' (*dukung Uighur*), surged in 2018 and 2019. This was a result of increased awareness among Indonesians regarding the Uyghur crisis, which aligned with an increase in Islamic activism. The issue experienced a substantial increase in coverage from 2017 to 2019, followed by a decline from 2017 to 2021, before dramatically rising once again in 2021 and peaking in 2023. This pattern can be understood as being a result of two factors: first, the Uyghur issue intensified from 2021 to 2022 in response to the UN Human Rights Office report that

substantiated claims of significant human rights violations in Xinjiang. The UN subsequently refused to debate the Uyghur issue, with Indonesia voting against a draft resolution on the issue (the Jakarta Post, 2022). In 2023, Uyghur activists travelled to Indonesia and a global Uyghur organization, the World Uyghur Congress, made a contentious decision to denounce Hamas' attacks on Israel on October 7. Consequently, the bulk of news on the Uyghur issue during this period related to the Uyghur activists' visit and their interactions with Islamic groups and communities in Indonesia.



Notes and Sources: The data was analyzed using basic features of Google's search engine, processed by inputting two specific keywords: "defend Uighur" and "support Uighur," while applying a news filter to the results. This approach was intended solely to observe the frequency of mentions related to the Uyghur issue. Due to the limitations of the tool, it was not possible to extract additional information, such as evaluating the sentiment of the news articles. However, this method serves its purpose of tracking trends, which is deemed sufficient for the analysis. This manual approach aligns with strategies often employed in academic research, such as the use of Google Trends, which operates in a similar way. For this study, the data was processed manually rather than relying

on automated data extraction methods. This ensures a focused and controlled observation of the frequency and visibility of the Uyghur issue in Indonesian news.

Trends related to ‘protect the Uighurs,’ which were likely tied to public protests and similar activities, declined sharply after 2019 and have remained low, with only ten news mentions recorded as of November 2024. I argue that this decline is associated with the breakdown of Islamic activism, the diminishing power of Islamic leaders, and effective state measures to reduce the influence of Islamic organizations. Support for raising awareness of the Uyghur issue has waned substantially. Arifianto demonstrates that the government employed co-optation and coercion efforts targeting Islamist groups, including legal proceedings against FPI leader Rizieq Shihab, the annulment of HTI’s legal status, and the designation of HTI as an illegal organization. The nomination of General Fachrul Rozi as Minister of Religious Affairs aimed to contain conservative Islamist factions ahead of President Widodo's re-election (Arifianto, 2020, p. 128). Subsequently, a year later, the government revoked FPI’s legal status, limiting its ability to organize protests and other events (CNN Indonesia, 2021).

The decline of political Islam has created unfavorable domestic conditions for dedicated support for Uyghur Muslims. Events that might have otherwise sparked a significant response and encouraged Islamic activism failed to resonate with the Indonesian public. For instance, in 2022, the Indonesian government rejected a UN motion to scrutinize China’s human rights record, a decision that went largely unnoticed by Indonesian Muslims. This muted response was likely the result of the weakened influence of Islamic activists, which has resulted in minimal pressure on the government to justify its stance. On the one hand, this has helped avoid confrontation with China; but on the other, the government feels little need to explain its position, due to a lack of public pressure. In other words, the Uyghur issue has lost its relevance for domestic politics.

Conclusion

This paper primarily sought to understand the reasons behind Muslim states failing to take meaningful diplomatic action regarding the oppression of Uyghur Muslims in China. The bulk of the literature on this topic argues that strong state partnerships between Muslim states and the Chinese government, as well as China's significant role in global politics, were the main factors behind Muslim states' acquiescence. But this article offered an alternative perspective, arguing that unfavorable domestic political conditions led to the 'deactivation' of Islamic diplomacy over the oppression of Uyghur Muslims.

Indonesia has offered a meaningful diplomatic response to the oppression of Muslim communities overseas only when there is strong demand from its domestic constituency. Contrary to analyses arguing that Indonesia completely ignored the Uyghur issue, I show that between 2018 to 2019, Indonesia made substantial efforts to resolve the crisis. These actions were driven by strong demand from Islamic groups, which were expressed through Islamic activist campaigns. However, this demand declined over time, in line with the consolidation of state power during President Widodo's second term. The government's strategy of coercing and coopting Islamist groups and figures significantly weakened their ability to demand the government utilize Islamic diplomacy in defense of the Uyghurs.

This argument was based on a single country study: Indonesia, where domestic politics heavily influences foreign policy. As with any single-country study, it captures the context specific to Indonesia but faces challenges in offering generalizable conclusions. While this paper adopts a comparative framework to address cases involving oppressed Muslims, it does not extend its analysis to comparing the diplomatic initiatives of other Muslim-majority states.

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