Aceh and Mindanao: A Comparative Study of Postcolonial Muslim Experiences in Democratic States

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Abstract

This study offers a comparative analysis of the postcolonial experiences of Muslim communities in Aceh (Indonesia) and Mindanao (Philippines), focusing specifically on the impact of colonialism on institutions, legal structures, and religious identity. Both regions, while sharing a Muslim-majority population and a long history of colonial domination, have developed distinct trajectories in their approaches to governance, law, and cultural identity within contemporary democratic frameworks. Aceh, as a province of Indonesia, implements Islamic Sharia through special autonomy, reflecting a negotiated balance between local religious identity and national legal structures. In contrast, Mindanao continues to face challenges in securing Muslim rights through peace agreements, such as the Bangsamoro Organic Law, highlighting ongoing struggles over institutional autonomy and legal recognition. This study analyses three main comparative aspects: the legacy of colonial institutions and legal systems, postcolonial transformations in governance and identity, and the dynamics of Muslim political participation in democratic states. The findings demonstrate that colonialism has left a profound imprint on the social, legal, and religious structures of both regions, but their responses have diverged due to differences in cultural contexts, national policies, and local agencies.

Keywords: Aceh, Mindanao, colonial legacy, legal structures, religious identity, decolonization, democratic state

Introduction

Colonial legacies have profoundly shaped Islamic traditions and resistance movements in both Aceh and the Bangsamoro region. Aceh, located on the island of Sumatra, is a province in Indonesia with a long-standing history as a powerful sultanate and a center of Islamic scholarship. In contrast, Bangsamoro is a Muslim-majority autonomous region within Mindanao, Philippines, encompassing the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Cotabato, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi. This distinction is important; while Aceh is a province directly under Indonesia's national government, Bangsamoro is a regional entity composed of several provinces, reflecting the different administrative structures in Indonesia and the Philippines.

The collection and study of Qur'anic manuscripts in Mindanao, particularly in the Bangsamoro region, were influenced by Spanish and American colonial rule, resulting in similarities with other Southeast Asian Islamic traditions and unique regional characteristics (Gallop 2021). Southern Filipino Muslims maintained their Islamic identity and values through resistance to Western colonialism (Lantong 2018). Similarly, in Aceh, the concept of *"perang sabil"* ("holy war") emerged as a central theme during various stages of the colonial period, serving as a discursive tool for both colonizers and the colonized to discuss progress, reform, and Muslim identity (Gedacht, 2015). Additionally, intensified maritime trade facilitated the Islamization of Southeast Asia, including Aceh and Mindanao, leading to diverse and evolving expressions of Islamic culture (Feener, 2019). Thus, the development of Islam in both regions cannot be separated from their colonial experiences, which continue to shape their cultural and religious identity.

Colonialism profoundly shaped both Aceh and Mindanao, leaving lasting legacies that continued to influence their political, social, and religious landscapes. In the early 17th century, Aceh was a powerful sultanate renowned for its cultural achievements and wealth (Purnamasari et al. 2024; Anwar 2020). However, the expansion of Dutch colonial control gradually eroded the sultanate's power, as the Dutch sought dominance over Aceh's natural resources and strategic trading routes (Anwar, 2020; Indria, Faisal & Reza, 2022). In Mindanao, Spanish and later American colonizations marginalized the Muslim population, transforming them from a dominant majority into a minority within their own homeland (Aquino,

2009). Colonial policies led to land dispossession and social discontent, fueling separatist conflicts that persisted to this day.

A key theme in both regions was the use of religious concepts, such as the idea of *perang sabil,* as discursive tools by both colonizers and the colonized to articulate visions of progress, reform, and Muslim identity (Gedacht, 2015). These colonial interventions disrupted traditional governance structures and intensified struggles for cultural self-determination and identity. The resulting tensions and conflicts have made the quest for autonomy and the recognition of Muslim rights a central issue in both Aceh and the Bangsamoro region (Latif et al., 2020).

The enduring impact of colonialism is evident in Aceh and Mindanao's contemporary political and social dynamics. Both regions continue to grapple with the legacies of colonial rule as they seek greater autonomy and affirmation of their Islamic identities (Bustami & Harahap, 2024; Jatmika et al., 2022). In Aceh, the implementation of Islamic law is closely linked to its special autonomy status within Indonesia, reflecting a desire to preserve its unique cultural and religious heritage (Bustami & Harahap, 2024; Bustamam-Ahmad, 2010). In Mindanao, ongoing conflicts and peace agreements such as the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) underscore the complexities of achieving lasting autonomy within the Philippine state (Jatmika et al., 2022). Armed separatist movements infused with Islamic identity have challenged the legitimacy of post-independence political systems in both Indonesia and the Philippines (Tan 2000). Although Aceh has achieved a degree of special autonomy, the situation in Mindanao remains complicated, with various groups continuing to pursue armed resistance (Jatmika et al. 2022). This persistent instability not only threatens regional security but also raises broader concerns about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Southeast Asia (Tan 2000).

Despite sharing a Muslim heritage and history of colonial subjugation, Aceh and Mindanao pursued distinct postcolonial trajectories shaped by their unique political, legal, and cultural contexts. Aceh formally integrated Islamic law into its governance through the granting of special autonomy within the Indonesian state, allowing for the institutionalization of sharia and the preservation of a strong regional identity. In contrast, Mindanao, through the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, continues to navigate complex political and cultural challenges in its ongoing quest for meaningful autonomy and recognition within the Philippine nation state. These divergent approaches reflect not only

differences in state responses and legal frameworks but also in the ways local Muslim communities assert their identity, negotiate with central authorities, and address the legacies of colonialism. By examining these comparative experiences, this study raises important questions about how colonial legacies continue to shape modern society, belief systems, and governance in the Muslim majority regions of Southeast Asia.

This study uses a comparative approach to examine how Muslims in Aceh and Mindanao responded to colonial legacies, focusing on the integration of Islamic principles into modern governance. By contrasting Aceh's successful autonomy with Mindanao's ongoing struggles, the research highlights key factors shaping postcolonial outcomes. Data was drawn from historical records, academic works, and policy documents, such as the Bangsamoro Organic Law, to explore how colonialism influenced legal and social systems. Using qualitative methods within a comparative framework, the study identifies factors behind Aceh's success and Mindanao's challenges. This approach offers a nuanced perspective on decolonization and Islamic governance. Before examining the colonial legacies of both regions, this paper will present a comparative literature review and highlight the theoretical imperative of decolonization.

Between Aceh and Mindanao: A Comparative Literature Review

Colonial Legacy

The social and religious structures of Aceh and Mindanao are heavily influenced by colonial legacies and shaped by distinct historical experiences and colonial actors. Dutch colonization significantly altered Aceh's governance structure and social hierarchy. The Dutch colonial administration imposed an administrative system that often conflicted with Islamic governance, leading to a complex interaction between Islamic identity and colonial rule (Kloos 2021). This period was characterized by resistance and violence, as exemplified by the Aceh War of 1873-1904. The colonial state used religion to portray resistance, creating a dichotomous religious disposition that suggested that the Acehnese consisted of a violent and conservative group and another cooperative and transformative group (Kloos, 2021).

In contrast, Spanish and American colonization in Mindanao disrupted conventional Muslim governance structures, displacing the indigenous Muslim

population and facilitating the arrival of Christian settlers (Defensor Knack, 2012; Defensor Knack, 2014). This historical context contributed to the ongoing conflict between Muslim and Christian communities, as Muslims were marginalized and their ancestral lands were confiscated (Aquino, 2009). American colonial policies, such as changes to land ownership laws and compulsory English education, have exacerbated tensions (Aquino, 2009). These factors contributed to the emergence of Muslim strife in the 1970s, where Moro ancestral territories remained a subject of debate (Aquino, 2009). Efforts to address conflict through education policy have shifted from integration to autonomy, but both methods have faced challenges (Milligan, 2001). A complex legal system inherited from the colonial government has made it increasingly difficult to achieve permanent peace.

Both regions saw the concept of *perang sabil* used as a discursive tool by colonizers to negotiate ideas of progress, reform, and Muslim identity (Gedacht, 2015). However, the colonial actors differed significantly: the Dutch pursued direct military control in Aceh, while Spanish and American colonialism in Mindanao combined military conquests with settler colonialism and cultural assimilation.

Comparative Colonial Actors: Dutch vs Spanish/American

Aceh and Mindanao's colonial experiences were shaped by different imperial powers, each employing distinct control strategies. In Aceh, the Dutch implemented a system of direct military confrontation and administrative restructuring, seeking to suppress local resistance and integrate Aceh into the colonial state (Kloos, 2021). The Dutch approach was characterized by prolonged warfare, culminating in the Aceh War, and the use of religious discourse to delegitimize resistance as fanaticism.

In contrast, Mindanao was first subjected to Spanish and then American colonial rule. Spanish combined religious conversion efforts with military campaigns, while Americans introduced policies of land dispossession, compulsory education, and Christian resettlement (Aquino, 2009; Montiel et al., 2012). These colonial interventions marginalized the Muslim population, transforming them from a dominant group into a minority within their homeland.

Resistance Movements: Perang Sabil vs Moro Revolt

Both Aceh and Mindanao saw the emergence of significant resistance movements rooted in Islamic identity but with different trajectories and outcomes. In Aceh, the concept of *perang sabil* galvanized widespread resistance against Dutch colonialism, blending religious duty with territorial defense (Gedacht, 2015). This movement was marked by mass mobilization and a strong connection to local religious institutions.

Meanwhile, in Mindanao, resistance took the form of the Moro Revolt, a series of uprisings against Spanish and American colonial authorities. Moro resistance was similarly motivated by the defense of Islamic faith and local autonomy but faced greater fragmentation due to ethnic diversity and the imposition of new colonial boundaries (Panarina & Petrov, 2019). Both movements were ultimately shaped by the nature of the colonial state they confronted.

Contemporary Autonomy Mechanisms: Sharia in Aceh vs BOL in Mindanao

In the postcolonial era, Aceh and Mindanao pursued different models of autonomy in response to their colonial legacies. Aceh has achieved special autonomy in Indonesia, enabling the formal implementation of Islamic law (*Sharia*) and significant local control over governance and resources (Bustami & Harahap, 2024). This arrangement reflects a negotiated compromise between the central government and Acehnese demands for self-determination.

Conversely, Mindanao's path to autonomy was marked by the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) under the BOL. While the BOL grants substantial self-governing powers and institutional recognition to the Bangsamoro people, its implementation faces challenges, such as internal divisions, limited institutional capacity, and ongoing security concerns (Perez, 2021; Panarina & Petrov, 2019). The effectiveness of these autonomy mechanisms continues to be tested by the political, social, and economic realities in both regions.

Postcolonial Transformation

After colonialism, Aceh's education and identity politics underwent major change. The Acehnese identity has evolved since the implementation of special autonomy and Sharia law, resulting in a hybrid education system that balances Islamic values with Indonesian national identity (Fitriah, 2020). This transformation represents a complex process of reconciliation involving the central government, Islamic community, and Free Aceh Movement (Sujatmiko, 2012). In post-conflict situations, education is crucial for promoting social development and addressing past grievances (Milligan 2009). Dayah, a traditional Islamic educational institution, has evolved to combine modern education with traditional Islamic teachings to aid reconciliation and foster tolerant individuals (Erawadi & Setiadi, 2024). These changes suggest that the negotiation of Aceh's identity occurs within the broader Indonesian context, emphasizing that identity is flexible and negotiable (Fitriah, 2020).

In Mindanao, the Moro struggle is rooted in the complex history of colonialism, religious differences, and ethnic tensions (Montiel et al. 2012). The conflict between Moro Muslims and Christian Filipinos has led to separatist movements and peace negotiations (Panarina & Petrov, 2019). The creation of autonomous regions in Muslim Mindanao has been a major focus, with recent efforts, such as the Bangsamoro Organic Law, representing significant steps towards recognizing Muslim rights (Panarina & Petrov, 2019). However, challenges remain, including the marginalization of indigenous Lumad people in the peace process (Perez, 2021). Weak Bangsamoro identity and nationhood have allowed the state to co-opt the movement's leaders, impeding progress towards self-rule (Buendia, 2012). Resolving the conflict also requires strengthening the Moro state and national identity and implementing an inclusive power-sharing system that considers all ethnic groups present in the region (Buendia, 2012; Perez, 2021).

Muslim Dynamics in Democratic Contexts

In Indonesia, the implementation of democratic principles faces challenges, particularly harmonizing them with Islamic values. However, synergies can also be created (Su'adah & Royhan, 2024). The integration of Islamic identity into a democratic framework is multifaceted, as seen in the experiences of the

Netherlands and Aceh, Indonesia (Merry & Milligan, 2009). The emergence of political Islam as a response to state failure has given rise to an ideological dichotomy between Islamic and secular-based governance (Anwar 2005). However, the stability of Indonesian democracy depends not only on moderate Islamic practices but is also influenced by factors such as the fragmentation of Islamic authority and weaknesses in the established party system (Buehler, 2009). These studies point to an ongoing negotiation between religious identity and democratic governance in Muslim-majority regions, emphasizing the importance of a sensitive approach to democratic principles and religious values.

The regions of Mindanao and Aceh face major challenges owing to colonial legacies and ongoing conflicts over land, resources, and identity. In Mindanao, the complex legal framework left by the colonial regime made it difficult to resolve land disputes and achieve lasting peace. Islam played a significant role in shaping Muslim responses to Western colonialism in the Southern Philippines, becoming a pillar of resistance and decolonization initiatives. The concept of *perang sabil* emerged as a diverse discursive tool in Southeast Asia during the colonial period, used by both colonizers and the colonized to discuss ideas of progress, reform, and Muslim identity. These experiences emphasize the importance of overcoming historical injustices and recognizing local autonomy and cultural identity in the context of postcolonial governance while keeping in mind the complex role of religion in shaping political dynamics.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis between Aceh and other regions reveals the uniqueness of the Aceh and Mindanao experiences. Studies comparing Aceh to other Muslim-majority regions in Southeast Asia, such as Southern Thailand, highlight the different historical and cultural contexts that influence their responses to colonial legacies. The resilience of armed separatist movements in Southeast Asia, particularly in Aceh, Mindanao, and Southern Thailand, can be traced back to factors such as regional neglect, military repression, and a strong Islamic identity (Tan, 2000; Chalk, 2001). Although these conflicts share structural similarities, they differ in terms of sustainability and popular support (Chalk 2001; Rupprecht 2014).

In response to separatist challenges, the Indonesian government implemented special autonomy laws for Aceh and Papua, offering concessions to defuse independence demands (McGibbon, 2004). However, the effectiveness of special autonomy in resolving separatist conflicts is limited without a more comprehensive negotiation process and strong community support (McGibbon, 2004). The external dimension of these conflicts has raised concerns about Islamic fundamentalism and regional stability (Tan 2000). In addition, non-traditional security issues arising from these conflicts have urged ASEAN to take a more proactive role in conflict management (Rupprecht 2014).

The comparison between Aceh and Mindanao shows the complex dynamics of Muslim regions that have experienced conflict. Separatist conflicts have occurred in both regions and have fought to promote democratic educational development (Milligan, 2009). However, they perceive autonomy and peacebuilding in very different ways. Conventional mediation methods in Mindanao have been supported by international NGOs and previous governments, which have maintained colonial governance practices (Adam, 2016). In contrast, Aceh pursued clearer territorial accommodation (Eaton & Shair-Rosenfield, 2023). Reconciling Islamic identity and civic demands in a democratic society is difficult, as these approaches demonstrate (Merry and Milligan 2009). The experiences in Aceh and Mindanao show that addressing postcolonial challenges requires consideration of local culture, politics, and history, highlighting diverse Muslim experiences in democratic contexts (Merry & Milligan, 2009).

To conclude, the colonial past of these two regions provides different perspectives on the colonial legacies in contemporary democracies. Incorporating Islamic law into governance, as seen in Aceh, and seeking autonomy through peace agreements, as seen in Mindanao, are distinct ways to address historical injustices and enhance social cohesion. This comparative study emphasizes this particular aspect of the region's experience, highlighting the importance of local cultural and historical contexts in shaping Muslim identity and governance structures after colonialism.

This literature review underscores the importance of balancing the comparative analysis between Aceh and Mindanao by deepening the discussion of colonial actors, resistance movements, and autonomy mechanisms. Expanding on the implementation challenges of Bangsamoro Organic Law and the institutional role

of BARMM enriches the understanding of Mindanao's postcolonial trajectory, complementing the more developed literature on Aceh's post-autonomy transformation. Together, these insights contribute to a nuanced perspective on Muslim dynamics in democratic Southeast Asia shaped by colonial legacies and contemporary political realities.

Theoretical Framework

Decolonization theory examines the processes through which formerly colonized societies seek to dismantle the political, economic, and cultural legacies imposed by colonial powers. It emphasizes that decolonization is not merely the transfer of political sovereignty but involves ongoing struggles to reclaim indigenous identities, restructure institutions, and challenge the persistent colonial power dynamics embedded in postcolonial states (Ashcroft et al., 2007; Radcliffe and Radhuber, 2020). The theory highlights how the impact of colonialism endures social hierarchies, legal frameworks, and cultural narratives, influencing contemporary governance and identity formation.

Applied to Aceh and Mindanao, decolonization theory provides a framework to understand how these Muslim-majority regions continue to negotiate their colonial pasts. Despite formal independence, both regions grapple with colonial legacies that shape their political autonomy, cultural identities, and social relations. In Aceh, the struggle manifests itself through the institutionalization of Islamic law under special autonomy, reflecting efforts to reclaim local governance and cultural heritage. Meanwhile, in Mindanao, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region's formation and the ongoing challenges in implementing the Bangsamoro Organic Law illustrate the complex process of decolonizing political structures and asserting Muslim identity within the Philippine state (Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020).

The Dutch colonization legacy fostered a strong sense of Islamic identity in Aceh and a desire for self-rule. The adoption of Sharia law as part of Aceh's special autonomy reflects this desire as it seeks to assert Islamic principles in governance. This move can be considered a form of decolonization in which Aceh reclaims its cultural and religious identity from colonial and postcolonial influences that seek to force them to become part of the government. (Salim, 2004; Feener, 2012)

The conflict in Mindanao, the Philippines, stems from the complicated history of colonization and discrimination of Muslim communities. According to Knack (2014), the Spanish and American colonial periods brought in Christian settlers and changed land ownership laws, which led to displacement and conflict between Muslims and Christians. The Bangsamoro people fought for autonomy because of their right to self-determination and pursuit of progress accordingly (Abubakar, 2019). Many peace agreements and attempts to establish autonomy have been made, including the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) (Defensor Knack, 2014; Panarina & Petrov, 2019). Upon ratification in 2019, Bangsamoro Organic Law was an important step towards conflict resolution (Panarina & Petrov, 2019). However, issues remain to be addressed, such as land ownership issues, cultural sensitivities, and the psychological care required (Montiel et al., 2012). To achieve a permanent solution, peacebuilding must involve different levels of society and government (Montiel et al., 2012).

The decolonization of science highlights the difficulties of Western epistemology and the development of local knowledge systems, especially in the context of Islam. This includes recognizing the relationship between Javanese identity and Islam, which is often separated in colonial research in Indonesia (Scientific Journal et al., 2024). Similarly, in the Southern Philippines, Islamic values have been central to the struggle to maintain Muslim identity and culture and against Western colonialism (Lantong, 2018). However, decolonization movements face problems, one of which is the possibility of falling into nativism and nationalism (Lee, 2023). Critics argue that non-colonial theories, such as the idea of "knowledge colonialism," are based on an overly simplistic interpretation of the West and have the potential to produce unhealthy epistemic relativism (Chambers, 2020). Despite these concerns, the administration's emphasis on local religious and cultural knowledge, as seen in areas such as Aceh and Mindanao, is a form of epistemological decolonization that privileges indigenous perspectives over outside influences.

Islamic Identity, Political Autonomy, and Sharia Governance in Aceh

The governance structure, social norms, and political dynamics of Aceh, Indonesia have been heavily influenced by the implementation of Sharia law.

Sharia is an essential component of political and social life. However, there are differences in the interpretation and application of this religion in different societies (Syamsuar et al. 2024). The implementation of Islamic law in Aceh is a future-oriented social transformation. It is not simply a reactive reaction to contemporary developments; it is part of a broader configuration of law, moral authority, and state power (Feener 2012; Feener 2014). Aceh's Sharia Court, established in 2003, has new authority with regard to Islamic symbolism, religious practices, and beliefs (Ichwan, 2007). However, limited cross-cultural socialization and discussion has led to different understandings and implementation of the objectives of Sharia (*maqashid syariah*) (Syamsuar et al., 2024). Local governments have positioned themselves between the central government and religious institutions, emphasizing both the legal and political aspects of implementing Sharia.

Islamic identity has been a foundational basis for resistance against Western colonialism since the 16th century and continues to underpin the struggle for autonomy and recognition of Muslim rights in Mindanao, the Philippines (Lantong, 2018; Macasalong, 2013). According to Lantong (2018), Islam has significantly shaped Muslim attitudes and responses to colonial challenges, serving as a core element in their decolonization efforts. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which evolved into a major political and social organization, advocates for the implementation of Islamic principles, self-reliance, and the promotion of an Islamic lifestyle among the Bangsamoro people.

However, it is important to clarify that the implementation of Sharia law in the BARMM differs substantially from the full-scale Sharia governance in Aceh. While BARMM's legal framework under the BOL recognizes Sharia as a source of law applicable to Muslim personal status and family law, its application is limited and coexists with the national Philippine legal system (Panarin & Petrov, 2019; Perez, 2021). Unlike Aceh, where Sharia law extends into criminal and broader civil law under special autonomy, BARMM's Sharia courts primarily handle personal and family matters for Muslims, and the region operates within a secular and democratic state framework.

From the period of Spanish colonization to Philippine independence, conflicts in Mindanao have been complex and multifaceted, involving ethnic, religious, and political dimensions. Postcolonial perspectives on education policy in the

southern Philippines highlight the emergence of a distinct Islam-based identity among the Muslim population, which continues to influence regional politics and social cohesion (Milligan, 2003; Buendia, 2012).

According to Nazaruddin (2014), Islamic identity significantly influences political preferences in Aceh because Islamic values are deeply embedded in the country's social, cultural, and political structures. This identity shapes the region's political and governance structure (Ichwan, 2007). According to Ichwan (2007), the implementation of Sharia law in Aceh demonstrates the relationship between the central and local governments and local religious institutions, which shows aspects of Islamic identity politics. Although Islamic identity aids political power and integration in Aceh (Rahim, 2018), it can also challenge democracy nationally, as seen in the mobilization of Islamic identity in Indonesia's recent general elections (Anam, 2019). The complex relationship between Islamic identity and Acehnese politics is indicative of a broader trend in Islamic studies, in which religion significantly influences governance and political decisions.

Democratic Governance

The coexistence of Sharia law and democratic institutions in Aceh presents a unique model of governance within Indonesia's multicultural and secular framework. The implementation of Sharia under Aceh's special autonomy has led to the development of religious regulations that influence social behavior and legal norms (Zada, 2023). Political institutions in Aceh, including the provincial parliament and Sharia courts, negotiate the boundaries of Sharia authority alongside the national legal system. Sharia courts have jurisdiction over certain criminal and civil matters, but their authority coexists with Indonesia's national laws, sometimes creating legal ambiguities and conflicts (Feener 2014; Ichwan 2007).

Democratic mechanisms, such as elections and legislative processes, continue to function in Aceh, with vibrant political competition often framed within Islamic discourse. Religious parties and groups advocate for the expansion of Islamic norms, which occasionally challenge pluralistic values and minority rights. Despite these tensions, Aceh's democratic institutions have shown resilience, with active civil society organizations and human rights advocates engaging in debates on the limits of Sharia implementation and the protection of democratic

freedoms (Sujatmiko, 2012). This ongoing negotiation highlights the complexities of governing a society where religious identity and democratic principles intersect, illustrating the possibilities and challenges of hybrid governance models in multicultural states such as Malaysia.

More broadly, democratic governance in multicultural societies faces challenges when Islamic principles are incorporated into the government structure. The incorporation of religion into state policy raises complex issues that require governments to balance secular governance with respect for religious freedom (Neng Nur Annisa & Tabassum, 2023). In Aceh, the gradual development of religious regulations under Sharia law illustrates a localized model of Islamic governance within a democratic context, raising questions about the balance between religious and civil rights and the tensions between regional autonomy and the national legal framework (Khamami Zada, 2023).

Political Islamists have occasionally capitalized on popular discontent by using religion as a mobilizing tool to influence policy and social norms. This dynamic creates both opportunities and challenges for democratic governance, as it can strengthen political participation while risking marginalizing minority groups and undermining pluralism.

Theory Intersection

In Aceh, the confluence of decolonization, democratic governance, and Islamic identity creates a complex environment. Within Indonesia's democratic system, Aceh's unique autonomy, which permits the application of Sharia law, produces a distinctive governance model (Putri Rahmah et al; Khamami Zada, 2023). Historical resistance to outside pressures and a peace deal that ended hostilities with the central authority are sources of this autonomy (Ti Aisyah et al., 2024). Sharia has been legalized in local and national political contests as a result of its gradual application within Indonesia's democratic framework, which could result in the creation of a miniature model Islamic state (Khamami Zada, 2023). Comparisons between the Muslim communities in the Netherlands and Aceh, however, reveal conflicts between the aspirations of civic integration and Islamic identity in democracies (M. M. Merry & J. Milligan, 2009).

Together, these theories help explain how Aceh and Mindanao developed different strategies to address the problems that emerged after colonialism.

Aceh's emphasis on Islamic governance and Mindanao's quest for autonomy through peace agreements demonstrate different ways of reconciling colonial legacies with modern democratic values. In understanding the Muslim experience in postcolonial democracies, the intersection of these theories underscores the importance of considering local cultural, political, and historical elements. (C. Chanco et al., 2017).

How Colonial Legacies Affect Aceh and Mindanao

The colonial legacies of Aceh and Mindanao have profoundly shaped their social, religious, and political landscapes, leaving enduring impacts that continue to influence contemporary dynamics. In Aceh, the Dutch colonial administration engaged in a protracted and brutal war (the Aceh War, 1873–1904) aimed at subjugating one of the last independent sultanates in the Indonesian Archipelago (Kloos, 2021; Goss, 2011). The Dutch strategy combined military force with political manipulation, notably through the work of Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, who advised the colonial government to co-opt secular chiefs (*uleëbalang*) while isolating the religious elite (*ulama*) (Rohmana, 2021). This divide-and-rule approach weakened indigenous governance but also entrenched religious identity as resistance. Dutch colonial discourse framed Aceh's West Coast as a remote and violent frontier prone to Muslim millenarianism, obscuring the complex local socio-political realities (Kloos, 2021).

Despite colonial pressures, traditional Islamic institutions, such as *dayah* (Islamic boarding schools), persisted, maintaining a distinct Acehnese Muslim identity within a conventional religious framework (Kusdiana, 2023). The Dutch policy of supporting Islam's religious aspects while avoiding interference in national affairs allowed Islamic education in Aceh to develop independently, fostering resilience in the local religious identity (Kusdiana, 2023).

In contrast, Mindanao experienced Spanish and American colonialism, which dismantled conventional Muslim governance systems and marginalized the indigenous Muslim population (Montiel et al., 2012; Defensor Knack, 2014). Spanish colonialism introduced Christianity and military conquest, while American rule implemented land ownership reforms and compulsory education, favoring Christian settlers (Aquino, 2009). These policies dispossessed Muslim communities of their ancestral lands, transforming them from a dominant group

into a marginalized minority, which fueled resentment and separatist conflicts beginning in the 1970s (Aquino, 2009). The complexity of the colonial legal framework has hindered the resolution of land disputes and peace efforts, with education policies shifting from integrationist to autonomy-focused approaches, both facing significant challenges (Milligan, 2001; Defensor Knack, 2014).

Social Landscape

The legacy of colonialism continues to shape the social fabric and identity politics of both regions. In Aceh, the implementation of Sharia law under special autonomy exemplifies the region's ongoing struggle to assert its Islamic identity within the Indonesian nation-state (Bustami and Harahap, 2024). This has produced a hybrid education system balancing Islamic values with Indonesia's secular curriculum, reflecting a negotiated identity that integrates local religious traditions with national belonging (Fitriah, 2020). Power relations between the central government, local authorities, and religious institutions remain complex, influencing the process of "Shariatization" in Aceh (Ichwan, 2007). The interaction between Sharia law, socioeconomic conditions, and national politics continues to shape Aceh's evolving social and political landscape (Thaib et al. 2024).

Meanwhile, in Mindanao, the Bangsamoro identity is challenged by ethnic diversity and power imbalances rooted in historical grievances and colonial governance legacies (Montiel et al., 2012). Religious and ethnopolitical divisions between Muslim and Christian communities persist, with Muslim identity often serving as a unifying factor transcending ethnic lines (Macapagal et al., 2018). Multicultural policy approaches, especially in education, have been suggested as pathways to reduce Muslim-Christian conflict and foster peace (Milligan, 2001).

Religious Landscape

The implementation of Sharia law in Aceh reveals the complex interplay between politics, culture, and religion in shaping regional identity and social order. Islamic law in Aceh serves not only as a marker of political identity but also as a form of resistance against colonial legacies and central state authority (Bustamam-Ahmad, 2010; Syamsuar et al. 2024). However, the interpretations and

applications of Sharia vary widely among different social groups, reflecting diverse understandings and local contexts. The Aceh government has strategically positioned itself between the central government and religious institutions, leveraging the implementation of Sharia law as part of a broader political project (Feener, 2014). Far from being a mere reaction to modernity, the reintroduction of Islamic law represents a forward-looking social transformation influenced by Islamic principles and modernist theory. However, the full realization of the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa* in daily life remains challenging, particularly in multicultural border areas where intercultural dialogue is essential but limited (Syamsuar et al., 2024).

In Mindanao, Islamic identity and historical grievances underpin the ongoing struggle for autonomy and recognition of Muslim rights (Macasalong, 2013). The limited scope of Muslim personal law and the difficulties in applying Islamic legal principles within a predominantly non-Muslim state highlight the challenges of integrating Islamic norms into government structures (Gamon & Tagoranao, 2024). Educational policies have evolved from integrationist approaches to those favoring autonomy; however, both have struggled to resolve entrenched Muslim-Christian conflicts (Milligan, 2001). The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has been pivotal in promoting Islamic revival and self-reliance among the Bangsamoro people, advocating political and cultural reorganization that fosters peace. Achieving lasting peace requires the development of a shared theological and political agenda that bridges the common values of Islam and Christianity, facilitating reconciliation and coexistence (Narciso, 2021).

Political Landscape

The political landscapes of Aceh and Mindanao bear a deep imprint of their colonial histories and postcolonial struggles. Aceh's protracted conflict with the Indonesian state culminated in the 2005 Helsinki Peace Agreement, which granted the province special autonomy and formally incorporated Islamic law into its governance framework (Saidaturrahmah et al., 2024). This autonomy allows Aceh to manage its internal affairs while remaining part of Indonesia, representing a negotiated settlement that addresses both political and cultural aspirations. Education plays a critical role in post-conflict reconstruction, helping heal past wounds and promote social and economic development.

In Mindanao, peace processes are ongoing, with the BOL symbolizing a significant step toward recognizing Muslim autonomy and rights. However, the implementation of the BOL faces persistent challenges, including opposition from non-Muslim groups and the need for stronger economic and political integration within the Philippine state (Panarina & Petrov, 2019; Perez, 2021). The Moro identity has been shaped by experiences of state discrimination and marginalization, fueling nationalist sentiment and demands for self-determination. These dynamics complicate peacebuilding efforts and require inclusive governance approaches that address the diverse interests of Mindanao's population.

Comparative Analysis

Both Aceh and Mindanao have been shaped by colonial legacies that continue to influence their struggles for autonomy and Muslim rights in the present day. However, their approaches to reconciling these legacies with contemporary democratic principles have diverged significantly. Aceh's emphasis on Islamic governance through special autonomy contrasts with Mindanao's pursuit of political autonomy through negotiated peace agreements.

The relative success of Aceh's special autonomy and the resolution of its conflict through the Helsinki Agreement stand in contrast to the ongoing difficulties in Mindanao, where peace remains fragile and contested. This divergence underscores the importance of local cultural, political, and historical factors in shaping postcolonial Muslim experiences in democratic states. Understanding these dynamics is essential to address the challenges faced by Muslim-majority regions and promote social cohesion and inclusiveness in multicultural societies.

Postcolonial Transformation

The postcolonial transformations in Aceh and Mindanao illustrate distinct approaches to negotiating religious identity and colonial legacies within their respective national contexts. Aceh's special autonomy has enabled the formal incorporation of Islamic law into regional governance, fostering a hybrid education system that harmonizes Aceh's Islamic identity with Indonesia's broader national one (Fitriah, 2020). Post-conflict reconstruction efforts have

strategically employed legal reforms, educational initiatives, and religious propagation to engineer social transformation and promote peace (Feener, 2020). Education plays a pivotal role in driving development and addressing historical grievances in both regions, serving as a bridge to social cohesion and economic progress (Milligan, 2009).

In the Philippines, efforts to adapt education policies to the cultural and religious needs of Muslim communities have contributed to strengthening Islamic identity in Mindanao (Milligan, 2003). These cases demonstrate how education in post-conflict settings can mitigate religious and cultural tensions while fostering inclusive development in the long term.

A critical element of this transformation is the evolution of traditional Islamic educational institutions, such as the *dayah* in Aceh. These institutions have transitioned from conventional religious schools to contemporary centers that integrate modern curricula with Islamic teachings. This transformation has been instrumental in promoting peace, social harmony, and revitalizing Islamic education in Aceh. The resilience of *dayah* institutions amid conflict and natural disasters has also played a significant role in community development and disaster risk reduction efforts (Basri et al., 2023).

The postcolonial era in Mindanao has been characterized by persistent conflict alongside ongoing peace negotiations. A landmark development was the enactment of the BOL in 2019, which sought to recognize the rights of the Muslim population and grant greater autonomy to the region. Nevertheless, the implementation of the BOL faces significant challenges, including resistance from non-Muslim groups and the imperative for deeper political and economic integration within the Philippine state (Perez, 2021). Furthermore, the reshaping of Moro identity has been profoundly influenced by experiences of state discrimination and marginalization, fueling a robust nationalist movement that demands autonomy and self-determination (Perez, 2021).

Tackling Colonial Legacies

The conflicts in Aceh and Mindanao have been addressed through distinct political and legal strategies, reflecting each region's efforts to reconcile its religious identities with democratic governance systems (Milligan, 2009). In Aceh, the implementation of Sharia law under the framework of special

autonomy has enabled the province to exercise greater control over its internal affairs, fostering a localized approach to governance that integrates Islamic principles (Fahadayna 2018). The 2005 Helsinki Peace Agreement was a pivotal moment in resolving decades of conflict, laying the groundwork for post-conflict reconciliation and development (Schiller, 2011). Education has played a critical role in healing past grievances and promoting social cohesion, contributing to peacebuilding efforts in both Aceh and Mindanao (Milligan 2009). Despite these advances, challenges persist in consolidating peace and addressing the long-term social consequences of protracted conflicts (Schiller, 2011).

In Mindanao, education policies have evolved from assimilationist integration strategies to approaches favoring autonomy and cultural recognition. However, both approaches encountered significant obstacles (Milligan, 2001). A decentralized and multicultural education system is increasingly recognized as a more effective means of reducing intercommunal tensions between Muslims and Christians in the region (Milligan, 2001).

The roots of conflict in Mindanao are deeply embedded in colonial-era injustices and ongoing land disputes involving Moro Muslims, indigenous Lumad peoples, and Christian settlers (Curaming, 2016; Bertrand, 2000). Peace initiatives, including the 1996 Final Peace Agreement and the establishment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), have faced setbacks owing to governance challenges, lack of inclusiveness, and unresolved land rights issues (Bertrand, 2000). The BOL represents a significant legislative effort to grant greater autonomy to Muslim-majority areas in the Philippines. Nonetheless, its implementation has encountered resistance from non-Muslim communities, complicating efforts to achieve lasting peace (Perez 2021). The legal framework governing land and resource disputes remains complex and fragmented, as conflicting laws inherited from colonial administrations continue to impede their resolution (Defensor Knack, 2014). Sustainable peace in Mindanao necessitates addressing historical injustices, ensuring the inclusive representation of all ethnic and religious groups, and resolving contentious land rights issues (Curaming, 2016; Perez, 2021; Defensor Knack, 2014). The marginalization of minority groups, particularly the Lumad, in peace processes remains a critical challenge to inclusive governance and reconciliation (Perez, 2021).

In summary, the postcolonial trajectories of Aceh and Mindanao illustrate divergent approaches to confronting the colonial legacy. Aceh's incorporation of

Islamic principles into regional governance contrasts with Mindanao's pursuit of autonomy through negotiated peace agreements in the Philippines. These differing strategies highlight the complex ways in which Muslim-majority regions navigate the legacies of colonialism in modern democratic frameworks. This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of democracy's adaptation in postcolonial contexts, emphasizing the importance of cultural, political, and historical specificity.

Muslim Dynamics in Democratic Countries

Aceh: Islamic Governance in the Context of Democracy

The implementation of Sharia law in Aceh, Indonesia, represents a distinctive model for integrating Islamic principles within a democratic governance framework (Khamami Zada, 2023). This approach reflects a strong aspiration to assert Islamic identity while simultaneously adapting to Indonesia's pluralistic and democratic context. It reshapes societal norms and aligns local policies with Islamic values, thereby reinforcing Aceh's unique cultural and religious identity (Sahrasad et al., 2024).

Religious authorities, particularly the *ulama*, play a significant advisory role in this governance model, influencing policy decisions on religious matters. However, their advice is generally non-binding, indicating a balance between religious guidance and democratic legal processes (Jalil et al., 2022). The convergence of Islamic norms and positive law is evident in both national legislation, such as the Marriage Law, and local regulations, such as Aceh's *Qānūn* on *jināyat* (Islamic criminal law) (Farkhani et al., 2022). This legal pluralism illustrates the potential for accommodating diverse religious perspectives within Indonesia's secular and pluralistic legal system.

However, the integration of Sharia into Aceh's legal framework presents challenges. One notable tension arises from the Indonesian government's efforts toward national homogenization, which sometimes conflict with Aceh's religious autonomy (Zada, 2023). The gradual and constitutionally compliant implementation of Sharia in Aceh has largely avoided direct legal confrontations with national law; however, critiques persist. Some scholars argue that the focus of Sharia implementation has been more symbolic, emphasizing religious

identity, while substantive issues such as social justice and welfare receive less attention (Bustamam-Ahmad 2007).

Moreover, Aceh's Shariah governance faces multidimensional challenges in the era of globalization, including the privatization of religion and rapid technological advancements (Murdani, 2022). Addressing these challenges requires a new paradigm of Sharia implementation—one that is responsive to global developments while upholding human rights and core Islamic values (Murdani, 2022).

Mindanao: Autonomy and the Peace Agreement

In Mindanao, longstanding conflicts rooted in historical grievances and land disputes between Muslim and Christian communities have posed persistent challenges for the Philippines (Defensor Knack, 2012; Defensor Knack, 2014). Significant progress toward peace was made under President Duterte's leadership with the passage of the BOL in 2018. This landmark legislation established the BARMM to address the Moro people's demands for autonomy and self-determination (Tana, 2023; Panarina & Petrov, 2019).

Although BOL represents a critical step forward, its successful implementation faces numerous challenges. These include ongoing threats from extremist groups, unresolved land tenure issues, and the pressing need for economic development and infrastructure improvement (Tana, 2023; Montiel et al., 2012; Knack, 2014). Effective governance in the BARMM requires fostering cultural sensitivity and inclusive political processes that accommodate the region's diverse ethnic and ideological groups (Panarina & Petrov, 2019).

Resistance from non-Muslim populations remains a significant challenge. Non-Muslim communities often demand greater political and economic integration within the Philippine state, complicating efforts to consolidate autonomy (Concepcion et al., 2003; Eder 2010). Additionally, economic disparities and inadequate infrastructure contribute to uneven development, exacerbating grievances among the Muslim population.

Unlike Aceh's relatively cohesive Islamic identity, Muslim communities in Mindanao are fragmented along ethnic and ideological lines, hampering consensus-building and slowing the implementation of inclusive policies

(Gamon & Tagoranao, 2024). The Aceh experience demonstrates that Islamic governance can coexist harmoniously with democratic principles when supported by a clear legal framework and strong cultural recognition (Törnquist, 2011; Barter Wangge, 2021). In contrast, Mindanao's fragmented identities and weaker institutional capacity underscore the necessity of sustained national support to realize effective autonomy (Gamon and Tagoranao, 2024).

In summary, while the BOL marks a significant milestone, ongoing challenges related to social cohesion, economic development, and political inclusiveness must be addressed to achieve lasting peace and sustainable autonomy in the region.

Aspect	Aceh, Indonesia	Mindanao, Philippines
Colonial Legacy	Dutch colonization, strong resistance leading to Aceh War (1873-1904)	Spanish and American colonization, displacement of indigenous Muslims
Post-Colonial Governance	Special autonomy with Sharia law integration	Not all provinces and cities in Mindanao voted to join the BARMM through a referendum.
Islamic Governance	Formal integration of Sharia into governance	Recognition of Muslim rights, but challenges in implementing Islamic law
Conflict Resolution	Successful peace agreement in 2005	Ongoing peace negotiations, BOL implementation challenges
Economic Challenges	Economic disparities, reliance on natural resources	Economic inequality, weak infrastructure
Social Dynamics	Strong Islamic identity, cohesive community	Fragmented Muslim identity, ethnic divisions
Democratic Engagement	Balancing Islamic governance with national laws	Pursuit of autonomy through peace agreements

Table 1. Comparison Islam in Democratic Countries Philippines and Indonesia

Conclusion

This comparative study reveals both striking similarities and important differences in the postcolonial experiences of Muslim communities in Aceh and Mindanao. Both regions share a legacy of resistance against colonial domination—Aceh against the Dutch and Mindanao against Spanish and American powers—which profoundly shaped their social, legal, and religious institutions. Colonialism disrupted traditional governance and imposed new legal structures, leading to enduring struggles over identity, autonomy, and self-determination. However, while both regions continue to grapple with the legacies of colonial rule, their responses have diverged due to distinct national policies, cultural contexts, and the agency of local actors.

Aceh's attainment of special autonomy within Indonesia has enabled the formal implementation of Islamic law and the preservation of a strong regional identity. This institutionalization of Sharia reflects a negotiated balance between local aspirations and national frameworks. In contrast, Mindanao's journey towards autonomy has been more complex and protracted, marked by ongoing peace processes, the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, and persistent challenges related to political fragmentation and security. These differences are shaped by the nature of colonial interventions, post-independence state structures, and the capacity of Muslim communities to negotiate with central authorities. The comparison underscores how historical trajectories and contemporary political arrangements continue to influence the realization of Muslim rights and governance in both regions.

By highlighting the diverse pathways of Aceh and Mindanao, this study contributes to broader discussions on decolonization, Islamic identity, and minority rights in Southeast Asia's democratic states. It demonstrates that while colonial legacies set the stage for present-day struggles, local agency and national policies play crucial roles in shaping outcomes. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners interested in understanding the complexities of Muslim political participation, autonomy, and identity in postcolonial contexts.

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