Analysis of Shiite Political Thought in Iran and Its Influence in Indonesia

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the process of ideological transfer, the instruments of soft power employed by Iran, and the responses of Indonesian society and the state to the presence of Shi'ite political narratives within a context of religious plurality. This study uses library research as its primary approach to deeply and critically analyse the dialectic of Shiite political thought in Iran and its transnational influence in Indonesia. The conclusions affirm that the contestation of ideology, identity, and civil rights within Muslim societies is not merely a matter of theology or political export, but rather a reflection of deeper struggles over how the state, religion, and citizens manage diversity and power in the global era. The Iranian model of al-Faqih al-Qadha'i (the rule of the jurist) has indeed shaken the old boundaries of Islamic authority and offered inspiration for resistance against injustice. Indonesia has instead triggered polarisation, stigmatisation, and even discrimination, reopening old wounds of fragile diversity. However, the experience of the Shia both as a marginalised minority and as part of a global narrative of resistance serves as a provocative reminder that Indonesia's strength as a nation does not lie in the stability of a single identity, but in its collective ability to transform differences into energy for dialogue, innovation, and reconciliation for a more just and civilised national future.

INTRODUCTION

The context of Indonesia as the world's largest Muslim-populated country provides its own dynamics in facing the penetration of Iranian Shiite political thought. Although since the early days of independence to the contemporary era, Islam in Indonesia has been dominated by Sunni traditions, the historical and contemporary presence of a Shiite minority cannot be ignored. Following the Iranian Revolution, waves of ideological and religious transformation influenced the intellectual spectrum, social movements, and political orientation of some Muslim groups in Indonesia. Through networks of alumni from Iranian universities, the influence of Shia religious institutions, and narratives of resistance against Western imperialism, the political influence of Iran's Shia ideology has slowly but surely built its own ecosystem within Indonesian society.

From a political perspective, Iranian Shiite thought presents a new discourse on the relationship between religion and the state, the legitimacy of clerical power, and resistance to external domination. The Iranian model of a state based on *Wilayat al-Faqih* often serves as both a reference and a source of controversy among Indonesian Muslim intellectuals (Wimberly, 2015). Some view Iran as a symbol of Islamic revival against tyranny and imperialism, while others see it as a political anomaly within Islam, as it is perceived to contradict the more accommodating Sunni tradition towards plurality of power and the separation of religious and state institutions (Matin, 2010). The tension between these two currents creates a discursive space that concerns not only religious identity, but also political discourse and the influence of global culture.

Iranian Shiite political thought is rooted in a long history of struggle and marginalisation. Since the events of Karbala, which became the central narrative of Shiism, the spirit of resistance and martyrdom has been the main basis for building political ideology (Inloes, 2024). Ayatollah Khomeini, with his doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, succeeded in reconstructing this narrative into a force for mass mobilisation and legitimising the revolution (Dabashi, 2017). The integration of Shiite mysticism, political interpretations of imamate, and the geopolitical realities of the region has made Iranian Shiism not merely a theological school of thought but also a political actor playing a strategic role in the global arena. Its influence extends beyond national borders, even challenging the world order established by Western powers and their regional allies.

One aspect that deserves attention is how Iran builds ideological diplomacy through soft power derived from Shiite political thought (Wastnidge, 2015). Through educational institutions, student exchanges, the publication of religious literature, and support for Shiite communities in various countries, Iran consolidates its influence systematically. In the Indonesian context, Iran's efforts to introduce Shia thought are often persuasive, emphasising aspects of rationality, social justice, and resistance to global injustice (Koo, 2024). However, Indonesia's highly sensitive domestic political dynamics regarding sectarian issues and religious radicalism mean that any penetration of foreign ideology is always under strict surveillance, both by the state and civil society.

From an epistemological perspective, Shiite political thought in Iran is a synthesis of imamah theology and revolutionary praxis. *Wilayat al-Faqih* itself is a reinterpretation of Shiite teachings on the leadership of the absent Imam (*ghaibah*), placing the ulama as the replacement for the Imam's authority during his absence (Azhar, 2023). This construct distinguishes Iranian Shiism from other models of Islamic governance, including Sunni states that emphasise the aspects of shura or consultation in politics. The implications of this doctrine are far-reaching, not only at the level of law and state policy, but also in shaping the political identity of global

Muslims. Iran's affirmation of Shiism as the basis of the state has given rise to a new polarisation in the Islamic world, where religious loyalty and political affiliation have become instruments in the contestation of power and international diplomacy.

This dynamic has also had a significant impact on relations between Iran and Sunni-majority countries. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has been both demonised and an inspiration. For marginalised groups in the Islamic world, Iran's success in overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a Shiite-based state has become a new hope for marginalised Islamist movements. However, for Sunni political and religious elites, the rise of Shiite Iran is seen as a serious threat to their hegemony (Maghen, 2011). The sectarian conflicts that have emerged in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon are clear examples of how Iran's influence has become an important factor in shifting the political constellation in the region, even becoming one of the main drivers of prolonged conflict.

The tension between Iran and the Sunni world is not merely a theological conflict, but a political struggle shrouded in religious identity narratives. In Indonesia, the Shia discourse always presents ambivalence. On the one hand, the openness of Indonesian society to plurality of religious sects provides space for the development of Shia communities (Formichi, 2014). However, on the other hand, resistance from radical Sunni groups who view Shia as a threat to Sunni orthodoxy remains a limiting factor for the widespread penetration of Shia. The history of sectarian conflict in various regions of Indonesia, such as Sampang and its surroundings, is evidence that the Shia issue is still very sensitive and can easily trigger social tensions.

Many studies, whether in the field of Islam, Middle Eastern politics, or inter-sectarian relations, have attempted to uncover the complexity of the interaction between Iranian Shia ideology and the socio-political development of Islam in other regions. In relation to this study, several literature reviews were selected because they have strong relevance, both in terms of theory, empirical data, and their contribution to tracing the transnationalisation process of Shia political thought. Crowther (2008) fundamentally dissects how Iran formed a Shia-based political identity that is different from the Sunni political tradition. Crowther highlights how the Iranian revolution was the result of a synthesis between the tradition of religious scholarship, the Shiite martyr narrative, and anger towards Western hegemony, which was then used as the foundation for a theocracy.

Hamid Dabashi (2011), in Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest, argues that Shi'ism, from its inception, has been a religion of resistance and defiance against tyranny, both theologically and politically. Dabashi traces how the spirit of Shi'ite protest has been passed down through generations and ultimately reached its peak in the Iranian Revolution. Zulkifli (2009) delves into how the Shia community built its identity, networks, and survival strategies amid pressure and discrimination. He highlights the role of Iranian education alumni, religious institutions, and personal relationships as key instruments in spreading Iranian Shia ideology in Indonesia. This analysis is important as empirical evidence of the transnationalisation of Shia Islam and its impact on social dynamics in Indonesia.

Previous studies have also highlighted how local political dynamics, sectarian conflicts, and state policies greatly influence the political and social expressions of the Shia community in Indonesia, including in responding to Iran's ideological influence (Mukhlis et al., 2023; Suheri, 2024; Syarif, 2023). From this literature review, it can be concluded that the discourse on Iranian Shia political thought and its influence in Indonesia is a rich, complex, and multidimensional topic. The relevance of previous studies lies not only in theological aspects but also in politics, sociology, and international relations. These studies show how Iran's Shi'a,

through its soft power, systematically influences the constellation of Islamic thought and movements globally, including in Indonesia, while also giving rise to various forms of resistance and adaptation at the local level.

This study aims to critically analyse the dynamics of Shiite Islamic political thought in Iran and how its influence is manifested, adopted, or even rejected in Indonesia. This study seeks to uncover the process of ideological transfer, the instruments of soft power used by Iran, as well as the responses of Indonesian society and the state to the presence of Shiite political narratives amid the plurality of Islamic sects. The essence of this study lies in the effort to understand the relationship between religion, state, and political identity in the context of globalisation and ideological contestation in the contemporary Islamic world. This study contributes to enriching the academic discourse on transnational Islamic politics, particularly the relationship between Iranian Shi'ism and the Indonesian Muslim community.

METHOD

This study employs library research as its primary approach to deeply and critically analyse the dialectic of Shiite political thought in Iran and its projected transnational influence in Indonesia. Library research in this context is not merely a matter of collecting and describing library data, but instead placing scientific source books, journal articles, dissertations, historical documents, and institutional reports as a field of dialectics between theories and empirical findings. The analysis is not only based on literature on Shiite theological doctrine and the history of the Iranian revolution. Still, it is expanded to include classical and contemporary Islamic political theory, studies of religious transnationalism, the concept of soft power in international relations, and Gramsci's theory of collective identity and cultural hegemony (Bates, 1975). This interdisciplinary integration enables the research to go beyond descriptive narratives about *Wilayat al-Faqih* as the basis of the Iranian state or the export of Shiite ideology, and instead critically analyse the instruments, strategies, and resistance that emerge in the process of transferring ideology to Indonesia from education, alum networks, cultural diplomacy, to the responses of the state and civil society to sectarian diversity.

This approach emphasises the synthesis between grand theories and empirical findings from the literature, resulting in a multidimensional analysis capable of explaining the interrelatedness between political, social, and religious phenomena. Through triangulation and content analysis, this study unravels the power relations, identity negotiations, and the dynamics of hegemony and resistance amid the vortex of Indonesian Islamic pluralism. Thus, library research here is not merely a tool for secondary data collection but also a field for critical reflection and theoretical analysis, placing the phenomenon of Iranian Shiism and its impact in Indonesia within the global landscape of Islamic politics and identity contestation in the era of globalisation. This reveals the complexity of inter-sectarian relations, state soft power strategies, and the importance of constructing spaces for dialogue in managing contemporary Islamic diversity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The *Wilayah al-Faqih* Ideology and Its Challenges for the Concept of Muslim States in Southeast Asia

From the outset, the idea of *Wilayah al-Faqih* has challenged both traditional and modern Islamic political structures. In Sunni Islam, religious authority and political power are functionally distinct, with scholars serving in a moral and scholarly capacity. At the same time, a sultan or king holds administrative power. In Shi'a Islam, it offers a model of imamate

leadership, which, in the context of the occultation of the Mahdi, is temporarily replaced by a qualified faqih or marja' taqlid. Ayatollah Khomeini, through his monumental work *Hukumat-e Islami Wilayat al-Faqih*, radicalised this concept, emphasising that in the absence of an infallible imam, power must be held by a qualified faqih to preserve the integrity of Sharia and the interests of the ummah. Khomeini asserted that secularism is merely a tool to perpetuate Western domination and marginalise Islam from the public sphere (Benard & Khalilzad, 1979). In the post-revolutionary Iranian narrative, Wilayah al-Faqih is not simply a religious doctrine, but a symbol of resistance, dignity, and a solution to the multifaceted crises facing the Iranian nation: crises of identity, legitimacy, morality, and sovereignty.

In practice, the *Wilayat al-Faqih* is not merely an abstract doctrine, but is embodied in the structure of Iran's constitution and laws. The Rahbar, or Supreme Leader, has the authority to determine foreign policy, military policy, and judicial policy, as well as to act as the highest arbiter in any domestic political conflict (Bazoobandi et al., 2024). This system operates in conjunction with democratic institutions, such as parliament and the presidency. Still, final authority remains with the Rahbar, who is elected by the Assembly of Experts (*Majlis-e Khobregan*), a special body comprising senior clerics. This construction combines elements of democracy, theocracy, and a unique clerical meritocracy. It is this model that is often perceived either mistakenly or deliberately exaggerated by some Sunni political and religious elites in Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, as a latent threat to their stability, plurality, and national identity.

Concerns about the *Wilayah al-Faqih*, particularly in Indonesia, must be understood within a broader historical and political framework. Southeast Asian countries, since their independence, have built a political consensus that differs from Iran's experience. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, despite being Muslim-majority countries, have chosen a relatively secular nation-state model, or at least one that limits the authority of religion in the formal political sphere. In Indonesia, Pancasila democracy and the concept of a religious state without a religious state are the foundations of a closely guarded national identity (Karimullah, 2023). Behind ethnic, sectarian, and cultural diversity, Pancasila functions as a social contract affirming that the state does not belong to any one religion, sect, or group. This is fundamentally different from the Iranian model, which explicitly bases itself on Twelver Shiism and makes the Wilayah al-Faqih the source of legitimacy for power.

This difference is what makes discussions about Wilayah al-Faqih highly sensitive and often cause public uproar in Indonesia. For some Sunni elites, both from large mass organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as well as Islamic political parties, the doctrine of *Wilayah al-Faqih* is seen as both a theological and political threat. Theologically, because it challenges the Sunni consensus on the relationship between ulama and umara, and opens the door to the 'import' of doctrines considered foreign in terms of history, culture, and the Islamic traditions of the archipelago. Politically, because in their perception, this model has the potential to disrupt the secular-democratic republican order that has proven capable of managing diversity for decades.

This threat is not merely empty rhetoric but is produced and reproduced through educational networks, religious lectures, social media, and religious and state regulations. Since the 1980s, the narrative of the Shia threat and Iranian expansion has been periodically circulated, especially during periods of domestic or international political tension. In a number of meetings, fatwas, and seminars, conservative clerics have asserted that Shia are not only different but also heretical, dangerous, and even subversive to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. Shiaphobia has become a real social phenomenon: any symbol, term,

or individual associated with Shia is easily accused of being an agent of Iran, a traitor to the nation, or the source of radicalism. The *al-Faqih* region has been reduced to a political 'ghost' that can be used to silence opponents, remove progressive groups, or strengthen Sunni hegemony.

This phenomenon is inextricably linked to the region's and the world's geopolitical dynamics. In the Middle East, the bloody conflict between Iran and conservative Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia, including their involvement in proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, has reinforced the perception that Shia are the eternal enemies of Sunni, and that the export of the Iranian revolution poses a serious threat to the regional order. This narrative has been imported into Indonesia through Middle Eastern educational networks, media, and even official religious institutions. It is not surprising that Shi'ismophobia in Indonesia often spikes in tandem with escalating conflicts in the Middle East. Ironically, this narrative is usually separated from the social, political, and historical reality of Indonesian society itself, where inter-sectarian relations, if traced back, have been peaceful and respectful.

At the practical level, the debate over the legitimacy of religious power versus state power found momentum in a number of political events. For example, the debate over the role of religious scholars in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, or in national political decision-making involving the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and major Islamic organisations. There is a tug-of-war between the aspiration for religious scholars to be more actively involved in public policy-making and the concern that such involvement could lead to the politicisation of religion, which would undermine the foundations of Pancasila democracy. This is where the *al-Faqih* region becomes a spectre: it is used as an extreme example of a clerical state which, in the imagination of some, has the potential to shift Indonesia's secular-republican identity towards a theocracy, or even religious dictatorship.

The *al-Faqih* model in Iran itself is not entirely identical to a clerical state in the simplistic sense. Iran still maintains democratic institutions, general elections, a parliament, and even a dynamic space for intellectual and political debate, albeit with limitations under the supervision of the Rahbar. Iran's political structure is the result of lengthy negotiations between traditional, modernist, and radical currents, making the final outcome more complex than mere pure theocracy. However, in Indonesia, this model is more often simplified as a political spectre to reinforce the status quo and silence any critical dialogue about the future of the relationship between religion and the state.

The Sunni elite's resistance to *Wilayah al-Faqih* does not stem entirely from pure theological concerns, but also from political and power interests. In a democratic country with a pluralistic base, the position of religious scholars is already very strong morally, socially, and even economically (Nurizka et al., 2025). Fears of Shi'isation or a state of religious scholars are often merely a strategy to maintain the status quo, control public discourse, and secure the political resources they have enjoyed. Thus, the debate over *Wilayah al-Faqih* has become a power struggle between conservative, nationalist, and pluralist Islamic groups, in which theological issues are merely used as a means to justify their respective political agendas.

Social reality demonstrates that the Wilayah al-Faqih discourse is frequently employed as a means to strengthen identity politics in Indonesia. In every sectarian conflict, political event, or religious debate, there are always attempts to link Shiites and Wilayah al-Faqih with radicalism, anti-NKRI, or the latent danger of treason. This practice of stigmatization creates an intolerant public space, marginalizes minority communities, and hinders healthy dialogue among citizens. Society is fed a black and white narrative about authentic Islam versus foreign Islam. On the other hand, the state sometimes finds itself in an ambiguous position, claiming

to be pluralistic and democratic, yet often compromising or even supporting discriminatory practices under the guise of maintaining social stability and harmony.

As a result, Shia in Indonesia experience multiple layers of marginalisation: on the one hand, they are oppressed by the socially, politically, and culturally dominant Sunni majority; on the other hand, they are constantly monitored by a state that is sensitive to any form of deviation from the mainstream. Suspicion towards Shia Muslims has become an entrenched prejudice, requiring no evidence and no dialogue. This practice highlights how fragile Indonesia's public space is in dealing with internal diversity within the Muslim community. Instead of strengthening national solidarity and integration, stigmatisation and Shiaphobia are eroding the foundations of unity, creating social wounds, and threatening substantive democracy.

At the international level, Sunni-Shia tensions rooted in Middle Eastern geopolitics further complicate the challenges facing the al-Faqih region in Southeast Asia. Sunni-dominated countries like Saudi Arabia frequently launch anti-Shia campaigns through educational networks, proselytising, and diplomacy. Saudi Arabia is even actively exporting the Wahhabi model of Islam to Southeast Asia as a bulwark against Iranian and Shia influence (Dorsey, 2024). In this competition, Indonesia often becomes a fierce proxy battlefield, where religious elites, mass organisations, and state actors compete to strengthen their hegemony with sectarian narratives. However, efforts to build resistance against the Wilayat al-Faqih have not necessarily stemmed the tide of ideological globalisation.

Young Indonesian Muslims have increasingly easy access to Shia literature, thought, and even global networks through technology and higher education. In a number of major cities, Shia intellectual communities are growing, building spaces for dialogue with other groups, and even seeking to introduce Shia Islam as a legitimate part of Indonesia's religious diversity. They emphasise that Indonesian Shiism is not a copy-paste of Iran, but an adaptation to local needs: fighting for religious rights, freedom of expression, and social justice within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia and Pancasila.

This is where the challenges and opportunities for the future of the relationship between the *Wilayah al-Faqih* doctrine and the concept of a Muslim state in Southeast Asia lie. Countries like Indonesia, with their long experience in managing pluralism and democracy, actually have strong assets to build an inclusive and tolerant public space (Karimullah & Sugitanata, 2023). However, the greatest challenge comes from elite resistance, political polarisation based on identity, and weak enforcement of laws against intolerance and sectarian violence. If the state and society fail to distinguish between legitimate theological differences and real political threats to national security, sectarian conflict will continue to smoulder, ready to erupt at any moment.

The strongest criticism of Shi'ism and resistance to *Wilayah al-Faqih* in Indonesia comes from pluralists and human rights defenders. They assert that the state should act fairly and consistently in guaranteeing the rights of every citizen, including religious minorities, without discrimination. Instead of making Shia Muslims a common enemy, the state should prioritise a legal approach, education, and inter-sectarian dialogue as solutions to religious conflicts. Acceptance of internal plurality within Islam, including Shia, is an absolute prerequisite for the maturity of democracy and the advancement of Indonesian civilisation as the world's largest Muslim country.

Shia Transnationalism: Networks, Da'wah, and Socio-Political Responses in Indonesia

The primary strategy for exporting Iranian Shia political ideas is through higher education and religious institutions. Universities in Iran, particularly in Qom and Tehran, provide open access to Muslim students from around the world, including Indonesia. Through scholarships, training programmes, and exchange initiatives, Iran is cultivating a new generation of Shia ulama and intellectuals in Indonesia who possess knowledge, affiliations, and strong international networks. Upon completing their studies in Iran, these alumni return to their home countries as missionaries, educators, or leaders of religious social institutions, often serving as the starting point for the growth of local Shiite communities. The emergence of Islamic boarding schools, religious study circles, and Shiite-based religious organisations in major Indonesian cities cannot be separated from the role of these Iranian alumni, who bring new enthusiasm, literature, and perspectives on understanding Islam and the political world.

The expansion of the Shia network was also strengthened through the distribution of books, translations of the works of prominent Iranian scholars, and thematic training programmes that often addressed themes such as resistance to oppression, social justice, and the empowerment of the *mustadh'afin* (the oppressed). Not only that, Iran has established an international media network in foreign languages, including Press TV, Al-Alam, and various online portals, which serve as a mouthpiece for Shiite diplomacy and narrative in the global discourse competition. At the local level, the Shiite community in Indonesia also utilises social media and online channels as spaces for advocacy, education, and solidarity consolidation amid the relentless stigmatisation they often face.

Diplomatic relations between Iran and Indonesia also serve as an important channel for fostering Shiite networks. The Iranian Embassy in Jakarta actively promotes interfaith dialogue, seminars, book publications, and cultural cooperation with local institutions. Iran deeply understands that soft power is the most effective instrument for establishing long-term influence, especially amid resistance from Sunni-majority countries that view any form of Shia expansion with suspicion. On the other hand, this diplomacy also opens opportunities for Shiite groups in Indonesia to gain protection, access to information, and global networks, even though at the same time it strengthens accusations from conservative groups that Indonesian Shiites are merely puppets of foreign interests.

The polemic over Shiite transnationalism in Indonesia has ultimately sharpened into two camps. On the one hand, anti-Shiite or conservative Sunni groups routinely promote narratives of the latent danger of Shiites, Iranian intervention, and accusations of cultural and ideological infiltration into Indonesian Islam. They claim that the expansion of Shia educational networks, publishing houses, and missionary activities is not merely a religious movement, but a global political project that could threaten national unity and even undermine the foundations of Pancasila and interfaith harmony (Karimullah, 2022; Karimullah, Akbar, et al., 2025). These narratives are often accompanied by rumours of large-scale funding, covert indoctrination, and the takeover of strategic institutions by Shia groups. These allegations intensify during geopolitical tensions between Iran and Sunni-majority countries in the Middle East, or during sensitive moments in Indonesia such as elections, terrorist attacks, or religiously motivated horizontal conflicts.

On the other hand, pluralist groups and human rights defenders argue that the presence of Shia, including all forms of religious networks and expressions, is part of the freedom of religion guaranteed by the constitution (Abashidze & Butt, 2022). They assert that Shia Islam is a legitimate part of Indonesia's pluralistic Islamic spectrum, and that any attempt to restrict, discriminate against, or accuse the Shia community without strong grounds is a violation of

civil rights and democratic principles. Furthermore, they view Iran's efforts to strengthen its educational and cultural networks as a form of diplomacy that is common in the era of globalisation, as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and even Western countries also export their values, education, and ideology through educational institutions, scholarships, and the media.

Amidst this wave of transnationalism, Shia groups in Indonesia often find themselves in a difficult position. On the one hand, they strive to strengthen their identity, fight for their right to worship, educate the younger generation, and build safe spaces in the face of social discrimination (Hidayatullah et al., 2025). On the other hand, they are constantly monitored, suspected, and often targeted by violence and persecution. Horizontal conflicts in several regions, such as Sampang (Madura), Bangil (East Java), and a number of other areas, are clear evidence that the stigmatisation of Shia Muslims has not only remained at the level of discourse but has morphed into real violence: expulsion, attacks, refusal to allow the construction of places of worship, and character assassination through the mass media (Muhtada et al., 2022). These cases illustrate that the narrative of Shia transnationalism has been used as fuel to inflame sectarian sentiment, especially in areas where the Sunni majority feels that their hegemonic position is threatened.

The state's response to these dynamics has not always been firm and consistent. On the one hand, the Indonesian constitution guarantees freedom of religion and protection for minorities (Prianto et al., 2024). However, in practice, there is often neglect, compromise, or even collusion between state officials and intolerant groups in intimidating the Shia community. The arguments of maintaining stability and preventing conflict are often used as excuses for not taking firm action against perpetrators of violence or intolerance, resulting in impunity becoming the norm. The state appears to be torn between enforcing laws that protect minorities or bowing to pressure from the masses and mass organisations in order to maintain political stability. These ambiguous choices not only harm the Shia community but also undermine the state's credibility in enforcing the law and protecting human rights.

As part of their survival strategy, Shia groups in Indonesia have developed various adaptive and low-profile models of da'wah (proselytising). Instead of emphasising political symbols that could provoke resistance, they prioritise universal religious narratives: love for the Prophet and his family, social justice, concern for the oppressed, and inter-sectarian dialogue. Many Shia communities in Indonesia choose not to use the term Shia' in their social and religious activities to avoid detection and stigmatisation (Ida et al., 2023). Islamic boarding schools, madrasas, and Shia youth organisations strive to strengthen the quality of education, religious knowledge, and social networks without overly opening themselves up to public spaces that are easily exploited by political opponents. However, pressure and violence continue to occur frequently (Wahyudi et al., 2025).

Discrimination against Shia is not limited to social exclusion but also includes denial of educational rights, physical attacks, and mass expulsions. In some cases, institutional betrayal has occurred: state schools have refused to admit Shia children, village officials have facilitated expulsions, and the media has biasedly framed Shia as the other or a national threat (Isakhan, 2020). All of this reinforces social wounds and widens the trust gap between the Shia minority and the state. The polemic over Shia transnationalism is thus not merely a theological or religious doctrinal issue, but has become a battleground for identity politics, geopolitical competition, and a battle of narratives in the public sphere.

In the Indonesian context, where identity politics has become increasingly dominant since the reform era, the Shia issue has been used as an effective tool to consolidate support, strengthen the hegemony of the majority, or even silence progressive groups that are

perceived as threatening the status quo (Karimullah & Sugitanata, 2025). In such a prejudiced public space, equal and rational dialogue becomes very difficult. Arguments about human rights are often drowned out by the cries of the majority who fear losing control. However, when viewed comparatively, the phenomenon of ideology and educational network export by Iran is not the monopoly of one country or sect. For decades, Saudi Arabia has planted its global influence through scholarships, mosque construction, networks of clerics, and Wahhabi-Salafi literature throughout the world, including Indonesia.

Turkey, Egypt, and even Western countries are also actively exporting their values and educational systems as part of their diplomacy and soft power. However, only Iran's Shia community is frequently labelled as 'interventionist' or a systemic national threat. This reflects both historical fears and the failure of the state and society to distinguish between human rights, religious freedom, and real threats to national security (Ibrahim et al., 2024). The horizontal conflicts affecting Indonesian Shia reflect a collective failure to build a healthy, tolerant, and inclusive public space. When society becomes accustomed to a single narrative, differences are always interpreted as threats rather than riches.

In situations like this, minority groups such as the Shia must pay a high price for their existence: social sacrifice, psychological trauma, and even the loss of their basic rights as citizens. The state, which should be the last resort, is often absent or even involved in practices of discrimination and violence. In the long term, this situation has the potential to give rise to counter-radicalisation, social fragmentation, and a loss of trust in state institutions. If the state fails to provide fair protection for all citizens, what will emerge is a society full of resentment, mutual suspicion, and prone to being drawn into horizontal conflicts based on identity.

Failure to manage the transnational flow of Shia Islam wisely will weaken Indonesia's position as a model of a pluralistic, democratic, and tolerant Muslim country in the eyes of the world (Karimullah et al., 2023). However, there is always room for change. Intellectuals, civil society, and several progressive religious leaders in Indonesia continue to seek opportunities for dialogue, multicultural education, and human rights advocacy to build a new awareness of the importance of respecting diversity within Islam (Karimullah et al., 2024). They assert that Shia Islam is a legitimate part of Indonesia's history and society, and that any religious expression, as long as it does not threaten the law and public order, must be protected by the state. New spaces for discussion, inter-sectarian seminars, and critical literature are emerging on campuses, research institutions, and youth communities. However, the challenges remain daunting in the face of a powerful tide of intolerance and political polarisation (Karimullah, Ghani, et al., 2025).

In the global context, the strengthening of Indonesia's Shia network also opens up opportunities for more constructive cooperation with Iran and other countries in the fields of education, culture, and science. If managed transparently, openly, and based on the principle of mutual respect, these relations can enrich perspectives, improve the quality of human resources, and expand Indonesia's international network without losing its national identity. The main issue is not the network itself, but the ability of the state and society to manage pluralism, overcome sectarian sentiments, and strengthen fair and non-discriminatory law enforcement.

Transnational Shiism in Indonesia reflects the enormous challenges of managing the globalisation of ideology, identity, and socio-religious networks in the modern era. The Indonesian state and society face a historic choice: whether to remain trapped in a narrative of 'threat' and narrow identity politics, or to dare to open up to dialogue, education, and equal living spaces for all citizens. A nation's strength does not come from uniformity, but from the

ability to manage differences as a source of wealth, inspiration, and collective strength. In an increasingly plural world, only nations that dare to make peace with their diversity will be able to survive, thrive, and inspire the world.

Thus, the polemic surrounding Shi'ism transnationalism should not be addressed with paranoia and exclusivism, but with the courage to build spaces for dialogue, law enforcement, and education based on the values of democracy, justice, and humanity (Parhi et al., 2025). The fundamental right to religious freedom is not the exclusive domain of the majority but a right guaranteed by the constitution for every individual. Any form of ideological intervention or expansion, as long as it operates within the legal framework and respects the state order, is part of the dynamics of the modern world that must be managed wisely, not through repression, discrimination, or violence. The future of Indonesia, as the largest and most pluralistic Muslim country in the world, is largely determined by the courage to view diversity not as a threat, but as a common foundation for a dignified and just life amid differences.

Shia as a Minority, Stigma, and the Politics of Diversity in Indonesia

Stigma against Shia is often associated with issues of radicalism, foreign intervention, and national treason. In many cases, Shia groups are labelled as Iranian agents with a hidden agenda to 'destroy' the integrity of the Indonesian state. This narrative is reinforced by geopolitical tensions between Iran and Sunni-majority Middle Eastern countries, as well as proxy wars involving Shia and Sunni factions in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. This global narrative is then imported into Indonesia through educational networks, media, and fatwas issued by Middle Eastern clerics, shaping the perception that Shia are internal enemies who could at any moment explode into a national threat. Accusations such as 'radical Shia,' dangerous Shia, and traitorous Shia have become powerful tools in restricting the space for life and expression of the Shia community in Indonesia.

This stigmatisation not only impacts perceptions but also has significant social and political implications. Discrimination, violence, expulsion, and bans on Shia religious activities have occurred in various regions such as Sampang (Madura), Bangil (East Java), and several locations in West Java, West Sumatra, and Kalimantan. These cases demonstrate how stigmas constructed in the discourse space are ultimately translated into concrete actions that violate civil rights, undermine the foundations of diversity, and create deep social wounds. The state often appears as a passive bystander, or even gets caught up in the logic of majoritarianism that sacrifices the principles of justice and protection of minorities.

The identity contest between Shia and Sunni in Indonesia cannot be separated from the long history of inter-sectarian relations within the Islamic world, but it also intersects with national politics and global dynamics. In classical Islamic history, differences between Shia and Sunni have shaped the course of civilisation, but often coexisted within the same social space. However, in the modern Indonesian context, these differences have been exploited to build walls that separate those who are entitled and those who are not entitled to be part of the *ummah* and citizenship communities (Mohammed & Jureidini, 2022). The Sunni majority often positions itself as the guardian of orthodoxy, while pluralist groups and human rights defenders strive to expand the space for tolerance and recognition of diverse expressions of Islam, including Shia Islam.

Debates between these two camps are often fierce, whether in academic forums, social media, or policy circles (Hayatullah et al., 2025). The majority group emphasises the importance of preserving the purity of Indonesian Islam from foreign influences and heretical teachings. They cite fatwas from Middle Eastern clerics, strengthen regulations based on

majority interpretations, and construct highly politicised narratives of threat. In contrast, pluralists remind us that the Indonesian constitution guarantees freedom of religion, that the history of the archipelago is marked by pluralism, and that Indonesian democracy would be flawed without respect for minority rights (Rifa'i et al., 2025). For them, marginalising Shia is tantamount to betraying the spirit of Bhineka Tunggal Ika (unity in diversity) and threatening the integrity of the nation that has been built on differences.

The socio-political implications of this identity contest are complex and multidimensional. On the one hand, Iranian Shiite political discourse, which emphasises resistance to tyranny, social justice, and the empowerment of the *mustadh'afin* (the oppressed), is often ambiguously interpreted in Indonesia. For some, these ideas are an inspiration for resistance against injustice; for others, they become a pretext to accuse Shia Muslims of being subversive or anti-NKRI. Not infrequently, narratives of justice and resistance originating from Iranian Shiites are twisted into evidence of a hidden political agenda, so that every form of Shiite expression, whether in literature, education, or social networks, is viewed with suspicion and threatened with restrictions.

When translated into the Indonesian context, the political discourse of Iranian Shiites confronts a state system based on the Pancasila and democratic principles. Indonesia rejects the form of a religious state and opts for a state that guarantees pluralism and freedom of religious expression within the bounds of the law (Latif et al., 2025). This context is what makes the penetration of Shiite political discourse never linear, but always involves a process of negotiation, adaptation, and often resistance. Indonesian Shia groups, aware of their marginal position, have chosen an adaptive path, preaching in a low-profile manner and adapting their expressions of religious diversity to local wisdom, while avoiding political narratives that could provoke adverse reactions. However, this adaptive strategy has not been sufficient to break through the walls of stigma and prejudice deeply embedded in the political and social culture of society.

The state, in its role as guarantor of justice and protector of human rights, often fails to take a firm stance in responding to potential conflicts involving the Shia. In many cases, the government tends to be compromising, prioritising stability over substantive justice. The argument of preventing horizontal conflict is used as a reason for not consistently enforcing the law, so that perpetrators of discrimination, persecution, and even physical violence against Shia often escape adequate legal process. The state is also sometimes trapped in the logic of the majority looking the other way, delaying justice, or even engaging in practices of surveillance and restriction of the Shia community's living space (Saramifar, 2024). This situation reinforces the impression that diversity in Indonesia is still beautiful in narrative, fragile in practice. In the midst of such a situation, Shia groups in Indonesia face serious existential challenges. They must not only struggle to maintain their religious identity, but also build social, economic, and cultural networks capable of sustaining community resilience.

Constant social stigmatisation, discrimination in public services, and threats of violence have forced the Shia community to develop underground, prioritising survival strategies over expansion. They build internal solidarity, strengthen cadre education, and utilise global networks to access knowledge, moral support, and sometimes protection when circumstances demand it. However, the dynamics of Shia identity contestation in Indonesia also open new spaces for critical reflection and social innovation. Amidst pressure, pluralist groups, intellectuals, and civil society have begun to seek spaces for inter-sectarian dialogue, multicultural education, and human rights advocacy as part of the struggle to strengthen substantive diversity (Sugitanata, Aminah, et al., 2023; Sugitanata, Karimullah, et al., 2023).

Various forums, seminars, and public discussions on Islamic pluralism, sectarian tolerance, and reconciliation between communities have begun to emerge, although the challenges are not insignificant (Wiranti et al., 2025). These efforts demonstrate that, although identity politics and stigmatisation remain dominant, there are always opportunities to create new, more inclusive, and humane spaces. The contestation of Shia identity in Indonesia, therefore, cannot be viewed as a purely sectarian issue. It reflects the failure of the state and society to create a fair, open, and inclusive public space. The stigma attached to Shia is merely a manifestation of a larger problem: the tendency to manage diversity through repressive, majoritarian, and prejudiced means. In an increasingly plural world, nations that fail to reconcile with differences will be trapped in horizontal conflicts that destroy national unity. The biggest challenge ahead is how to shift the paradigm of diversity management from mere formal tolerance to substantive respect for the rights of minorities.

The state must reaffirm its commitment to upholding justice and protection for all citizens without discrimination. The legal system must be implemented consistently, perpetrators of intolerance must be punished without exception, and public spaces must be opened as wide as possible for dialogue across identities. Multicultural education and diversity literacy must become an integral part of the national education system, not merely elitist discourse that never reaches the grassroots level.

Meanwhile, civil society, the media, and educational institutions must strengthen narratives of diversity, debunk sectarian myths, and build a new understanding of Islam that is friendly, inclusive, and based on universal principles of humanity. Majority groups must be encouraged to step out of their comfort zones of majoritarianism and develop empathy, mutual respect, and solidarity across sects. Only in this way can Indonesia's diversity survive amid the onslaught of identity politics, ideological globalisation, and increasingly complex challenges of the modern age.

CONCLUSION

The contestation of identity, politics, and diversity in the Islamic world is far more complex and paradoxical than is often perceived by the public. Iran, with its doctrine of *Wilayah al-Faqih*, has successfully projected itself as an ideological and spiritual force that not only challenges Western domination but also offers a new alternative for the search for authority and justice in global Muslim society. However, in the Indonesian context, the influence and transnational networks of Shia Islam have sparked sharp debates about the boundaries of Islam, nationalism, and the civil rights of minorities. Stigmatisation, identity politics, and majoritarian tendencies not only marginalise Shia Islam but also expose the vulnerabilities of Pancasila democracy in managing pluralism amid the currents of globalisation and geopolitical pressures.

Ironically, the narrative battle between mainstream exclusivism and the courage of pluralist groups to embrace differences has become a testing ground for Indonesia's maturity in realising true diversity. The experience of the Shia in Indonesia, both as an inspiration and a victim, offers a lesson that the strength of a nation does not lie in uniformity or homogeneity, but in its ability to transform identity tensions into a constructive, fair, and humane space for dialogue. Within this framework, the future of pluralism and nationalism in Indonesia will be greatly determined by the courage of the state, civil society, and religious leaders to reject politics of hatred and discrimination, and to build a public space that celebrates diversity as a shared strength. If this great challenge can be addressed, Indonesia will not only survive as

the largest Muslim-majority country but also serve as a global example of how pluralism and justice can thrive in a modern society.

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