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The Politics of Identity in Indonesia and Pakistan's Foreign Policies Against Islamophobia

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Abstract

This study examines the responses of Indonesia and Pakistan to Islamophobia, highlighting the influence of domestic politics, religious identity, and external factors on their foreign policies. Using the three-level framework, it analyzes the interplay of individual, state, and systemic factors shaping their foreign policy decision-making and diplomacy. This research is based on primary data, comprising 22 interviews conducted in both countries, and an extensive review of archival data from official sources. This comparative analysis reveals how leadership, societal structures, and global dynamics shape distinct national strategies in addressing Islamophobia and promoting Islamic identity. It argues that populist leaders like Indonesia's Joko Widodo and Pakistan's Imran Khan used religious identity to mobilize domestic support and advance international advocacy. Indonesia's strategy incorporates the promotion of moderate Islam through transnational networks like Nahdlatul Ulama, enabling a proactive and comprehensive diplomatic approach. In contrast, Pakistan's engagement is constrained by economic dependence on the West, resulting in a limited reliance on multilateral platforms, such as the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Introduction

Islamophobia refers to prejudice, discrimination, or hostility towards Islam and Muslims, encompassing irrational fear or hatred of Islam, its teachings, and its followers. According to Hunter, Islamophobia "has been used widely to describe the fear that people have of Islam, Muslims or a perceived Muslimness: a mindset which often manifests in religiously aggravated hate crimes and anti-Muslim discrimination" (2022, p. 45). The roots of Islamophobia are deeply tied to historical, geopolitical factors, and persistent stereotypes about Islam. The phenomenon intensified after the September 11, 2001, attacks, as the perpetrators' association with Islam fueled widespread anti-Muslim sentiment, reinforcing discrimination and negative portrayals. Manifestations include hate crimes, from online abuse to physical assaults, vandalism of mosques, and targeting individuals based on religious identity or attire (Obermaier, Schmuck, and Saleem 2021; Babacan 2023). Discrimination also occurs in employment, education, housing, and public services, where Muslims may face job denials, harassment, and biased treatment based on their faith (Rehman and Hanley 2023). Given these manifestations of Islamophobia, the responses of Muslim-majority states such as Indonesia and Pakistan provide a critical area for investigation. Both countries, as significant players in the Muslim world, have adopted policies and actions to counter Islamophobia, but the domestic and external drivers shaping their approaches remain underexplored. This research seeks to address the gap by answering the following questions: What domestic political, societal, and ideological factors, as well as external strategic considerations, shape Indonesia's and Pakistan's foreign policy responses to Islamophobia? In what ways have Indonesia and Pakistan cooperated—bilaterally, regionally, and multilaterally—to counter Islamophobia, and what do these patterns of cooperation reveal about broader variations within the Muslim world in confronting this global challenge?

Given the centrality of pan-Islamism in the foreign policies of many Muslim-majority states (Formichi 2010; Ahmed and Akbarzadeh 2023), analyzing their reactions to Islamophobia is critical. At the international level, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) monitors global Islamophobia through its Islamophobia Observatory. The OIC's 14th report, launched at the Council of Ministers' meeting in Islamabad in 2022, identified hotspots, including India, the UK, the US, France, and Canada (OIC 2022). Muslim leaders have raised concerns at the United Nations, such as Imran Khan of Pakistan (Khan 2020), and states like Pakistan and Indonesia have discussed Islamophobia in bilateral exchanges. In 2021, Pakistan's foreign minister urged his Indonesian counterpart to strengthen cooperation through the OIC (Sajid 2021). While these diplomatic efforts have continued for years, little is known about the domestic and external drivers of Islamophobia's prominence in the foreign policy agendas of Muslim-majority states like Indonesia and Pakistan.

There is a growing scholarship on the impacts of Islamophobia around the world and how the Muslim world is reacting to it. There is, however, substantial focus on collective efforts, for example, through forums like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the United Nations (Uddin et al., 2022). There are also individual case studies and comparative analysis (Putra, 2023; Shah, 2022), but without grounding the work in any international relations framework. Hunter (2022) has examined Pakistan's reactions to Islamophobia by explaining the relationship between Islamophobia and anti-Pakistan sentiments in the West. There is also the work of Malik et al (2021) on Pakistan but that is limited to Islamophobia in the West and what Pakistan and organizations like the UN can do. Similarly, there is an extensive examination of Indonesia's foreign policy under Joko Widodo via-a-vis the role of Islam (Damayanti and Hasan, 2024), but that study does not examine what drives Indonesia's diplomatic efforts to countering Islamophobia. There is another study focusing on Indonesia's efforts in relation to countering Islamophobia but that does not provide a detailed examination of what Jakarta has done but provides examines only the role of Nahdlatul Ulama (Taufiq et al., 2022). There is no previous research that compares the drivers of foreign policy decision-making vis-à-vis Islamophobia in the two largest Muslim states.

In terms of structure, the paper begins with a detailed explanation of theoretical framework and research methodology. This is followed by the two case studies, each of which examines the individual, state, and international system-level factors that shape foreign policy decision-making in Indonesia and Pakistan.

Framework and Methodology

Contemporary scholarship in foreign policy analysis has moved beyond traditional, state-centric and rationalist models toward more holistic, multi-level, and interpretive approaches. Increasingly, scholars argue that ideas, identity, emotions, and narratives play a decisive role in shaping state behaviour (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2023; McCourt, 2022). This shift reflects broader theoretical developments in which classical structural and materialist explanations are reconsidered through constructivist, post-structural, and practice-oriented perspectives that foreground agency, meaning-making, and contextual interpretation (Neumann, 2002). At the core of this constructivist turn is the claim that identity

fundamentally structures foreign policy by shaping how states define their interests and interpret the international environment. Constructivism thus asserts that interests are socially produced and inseparable from identity (Hopf, 1998). Historical examples underscore this relationship: Turkey's pro-Western orientation after World War II reflected its Kemalist identity, while its recent Middle East engagement stems from a revived Ottoman-Islamist identity (Donelli & Cannon, 2025). Similarly, the 1979 Iranian Revolution redefined Iran's identity around Islamism and anti-imperialist Shi'ism, reshaping its relations with the United States and Saudi Arabia (Ahmed & Akbar, 2023). These cases demonstrate that understanding foreign policy requires analysing how domestic structures and ideational forces intersect. Political institutions, elite decision-making, and bureaucratic processes interact with leadership perceptions, public sentiment, and identity narratives to influence external behaviour (Cadier, 2024). Foreign policy therefore emerges from the interplay between internal dynamics and external pressures, including alliances, global hierarchies, and power asymmetries (Ripsman, 2009). Such an identity-informed approach is especially relevant for comparing how Indonesia and Pakistan—the world's two largest Muslim-majority states—respond to Islamophobia in the West.

This study adopts a foreign policy analysis (FPA) framework to examine how domestic and international factors interact in shaping state behaviour. Putnam's (1988) "two-level game" highlights how foreign policy decisions reflect simultaneous negotiations between domestic interests and international constraints. To further unpack the complexity of decision-making in Indonesia and Pakistan, the study also employs Waltz's (2001) three-level analysis—individual, state, and systemic. This multi-level framework is well suited for analysing why two Muslim-majority states with shared concerns about Islamophobia nonetheless pursue divergent diplomatic strategies. At the individual level, the study assesses how leaders, foreign ministers, religious authorities, and senior bureaucrats frame Islamophobia and prioritise it within foreign policy agendas. The state level considers domestic political structures, ideological orientations, and the influence of institutions and social actors. At the systemic level, the framework situates both countries within broader international dynamics, including great-power politics, Western discourses on Islam, geopolitical alignments, and multilateral platforms such as the OIC and UN Human Rights Council. Taken together, these levels offer a comprehensive comparative lens for identifying where and why Indonesia and Pakistan converge or differ in their approaches to countering Islamophobia in Western contexts.

The study is based on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews conducted in 2023–2024, involving ten participants in Pakistan and twelve in Indonesia, including former ambassadors, academics, think tank researchers, journalists, and retired military officials (see Annexures 1 and 2). Semi-structured interviews facilitated systematic comparison while allowing for contextual nuance. Interviews in Indonesia were conducted face-to-face, while those in Pakistan were held virtually. All participants provided informed consent, with anonymity granted where requested. Interview data is triangulated with archival materials, including official statements, policy documents, and speeches obtained from both countries' Ministries of Foreign Affairs. This triangulation enhances the validity of findings and enables a richer interpretation of how domestic politics, leadership preferences, and

systemic pressures shape Indonesia's and Pakistan's foreign policy responses to Islamophobia in the West.

A Case Study of Indonesia

Individual

During his presidency (2004–2014), Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono sought to construct a new Islamic identity for Indonesia grounded in the principles of moderate Islam. His leadership emphasized Indonesia's pluralistic ethos and the compatibility of Islam with democracy, modernity, and tolerance, positioning the country as a global model of democratic and moderate Islam. As Nugraha notes, "the new identity is put in place to aspire bigger role if not a leadership in international affairs by selling the model of democracy-moderate Islam nexus" (Nugraha, 2012, p. 1). Although economic issues dominated Joko Widodo's agenda, Islamic identity continued to shape both domestic politics and foreign policy during his tenure (2014–2024). Studies argue that Jokowi's foreign policy reflected a calibrated interplay between Islamic identity and national interests, with Islamic principles selectively informing diplomatic narratives and international engagement (Damayanti & Hasan, 2024). Domestically, Jokowi cultivated support from major moderate Islamic organizations, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, to reinforce his political legitimacy and counter pressures from conservative Islamic factions (Arifianto, 2022). His administration emphasized inclusivity, tolerance, and a pluralistic vision of Islam, presenting himself as a unifying figure committed to Islamic values of justice and social welfare while resisting radicalism.

Islamic identity—particularly Indonesia's longstanding commitment to promoting a moderate, peaceful, and tolerant interpretation of Islam—has been central to both its domestic politics and foreign policy. This orientation has shaped a wide range of diplomatic initiatives. Seeth (2023) argues that Indonesia's peace diplomacy relies heavily on the promotion of moderate Islam through collaboration between state and non-state actors, the global activism of Nahdlatul Ulama, and the internationalisation of Islamic higher education as a vehicle for soft-power projection. Under Joko Widodo, the government actively participated in dialogues on Islamophobia, facilitated interfaith exchanges, and worked closely with transnational Islamic networks such as Nahdlatul Ulama to advance these ideals. By integrating Islamic values into foreign policy, Jokowi positioned Indonesia as a leading advocate of peaceful and inclusive interpretations of Islam, combining faith-driven principles with pragmatic diplomacy. During Jokowi's tenure, Indonesia made notable efforts to elevate Islam as part of its international identity, particularly through the promotion of *wasatiyyah* (moderation) and *tasamuh* (tolerance) (Antara News, 2018). These principles were reflected in Jakarta's solidarity with Palestinian Muslims, initiatives to promote Islamic moderation through education, and sustained inter-religious dialogue (Damayanti & Hasan, 2024). This revival of Islamic identity across domestic and foreign policy led one study to argue:

Jokowi's administration navigated a delicate balance between projecting Indonesia as a moderate Muslim-majority nation – which refers to a balanced, inclusive, and progressive interpretation of Islam

that emphasizes tolerance, peace, and coexistence – as well as advancing its economic and strategic objectives on the global stage. Islamic narratives – which refer to the strategic use of Islamic principles, values, and cultural references to Indonesia's foreign policy discourse and diplomatic initiatives – were strategically utilized to bolster Indonesia's diplomatic engagements, particularly with the Muslim majority countries (Damayanti and Hasan, 2024, p. 12).

State

Indonesia has consistently condemned incidents of Islamophobia and promotes a notion of moderate Islam that aligns Islamic teachings with contemporary global norms. Its foreign policy stance on countering Islamophobia in the West is shaped by both domestic considerations and geopolitical interests. Constitutionally, Indonesia is mandated by the fourth paragraph of the 1945 Constitution to help establish a world order based on freedom, lasting peace, and social justice—a commitment that, according to research participants, obliges the state to address Islamophobia internationally (Hakim, personal communication, August 22, 2023; Mu'ti, personal communication, August 16, 2023). As noted by Jakarta Post senior editor Endi Bayuni, this constitutional foundation requires the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to engage actively in global peace-building initiatives, including efforts to counter Islamophobia (Bayuni, personal communication, August 12, 2023).

Although Indonesia is not an Islamic republic like Pakistan, being a predominantly Muslim country constitutes a domestic factor that significantly influences its approach towards addressing Islamophobia. Historically, following the transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic system in 1998, the Indonesian government grappled with the relationship between the state and religion in Indonesia. It was marked by the emergence of many Islamic parties in Indonesia, one of which was the Justice Party (PK, transformed into Prosperous Justice Party, PKS), having a platform to enforce Islamic Law. Shari'a law enforcement and decentralization have been open since 1999, with several Shari'a regional regulations appearing in Bulukumba, Aceh, and Sukabumi, making the power center weak (Vermonte, personal communication, August 15, 2023).

With the rise of religious conservatism in Indonesia and the emergence of high-profile terrorist incidents such as the 2002 Bali Bombings, Indonesia has faced growing international scrutiny concerning the role of Islam in its domestic politics. The Bali Bombings not only exposed the operational presence of transnational jihadist networks like Jemaah Islamiyah but also intensified negative global perceptions of Indonesian Muslims, contributing to a broader discourse of Islamophobia. In response, the Indonesian government recalibrated its counterterrorism policies by strengthening intelligence cooperation, legal frameworks, and deradicalization programs. Equally important has been Indonesia's use of public diplomacy as a strategic tool to manage international perceptions and reaffirm its identity as a pluralist, democratic Muslim-majority state. As Vermonte, former Executive Director of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS Indonesia), noted in an interview:

The Foreign Minister (2001–2009) Hasan Wirajuda and others were working hard. He had to show (Moderate Indonesian Islam to address Islamophobia) because we were also victims of terrorism. However, our state was also based on 'Belief in the One and Only God' or religion. On the other hand, the West was conducting Global War on Terror. Therefore, the government was under pressure from both internal and external forces. Thus, public diplomacy was employed.

In addition, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Indonesia to Slovakia also emphasized that such incidents pushed Indonesia to address the issue of Islamophobia.

The main factor that drove us to adopt a foreign policy response to Islamophobia is, of course, when we became victims of terrorist attacks. The events, from the Bali Bombings I and II to the JW Marriott hotel bombing, always cited "Islam" in their justification. Therefore, this created the possibility that Indonesians might become targets of Islamophobia. Hence, we had to think quickly about how to handle this situation (R. Pribadi Sutiono, personal communication, August 12, 2023).

Considering the incidents of Islamophobia in recent years, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as moderate Muslim organizations, condemned the Danish cartoons as an insult to religious beliefs. However, they advocated for a peaceful and respectful response, highlighting the importance of dialogue, tolerance, and responsible behavior. Indeed, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah are known as the two largest mass-based moderate Islamic organizations in Indonesia. According to data compiled by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as of 2021, Nahdlatul Ulama has 95 million Muslim followers, while Muhammadiyah has 65 million Muslim followers out of a total of 231 million Indonesian Muslims (Liputan6.com, 2023). Both organizations are immensely influential in Indonesian politics and national stability and often assist in executing government policy processes. In the international seminar "Indonesian Islam on the Global Stage: Peaceful Inspiration of the Archipelago for the World" at the Senate Hall of Gajah Mada University, on January 1, 2019, Indonesian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, AM. Fachir highlighted that Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah play an important role in the development of democracy and peace in Indonesia and are actively involved in building world peace. In his speech, Fachir expressed:

Projecting Islam as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* to the world has been done for 15 years. This has been done with the diplomacy of all religious leaders. Moderate and tolerant Islam is an asset, ... [Nahdlatul Ulama] and Muhammadiyah must be the glue of diversity (Universitas Gajah Mada, 2019).

Such Muslim groups also channeled their aspirations through political parties, especially Islamic political parties like the National Awakening Party (PKB, Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa), United Development Party (PPP, Partai Persatuan Pembangunan), and National Mandate Party (PAN, Partai Amanat Nasional), as well as through Muslim politicians. The convergence of these groups' interests ultimately combined into collective pressure on the government, including demands to take a firm stance on the issue of Islamophobia. Islamic political parties have indeed taken benefit from the situation. PKS, for example, is one of the leading Islamic political parties voicing strong condemnations of Islamophobia through the House of Representatives (see Ranggawari, 2023; Humas Fraksi PKS, 2023; TvOne, 2023). In response to

such a domestic pressure, the Indonesian government condemned the publication of caricatures to address Muslim aspirations. Furthermore, expressions of public outrage in response to incidents of Islamophobia have manifested in protests and demonstrations across Indonesia, reflecting the issue's potential to destabilize the domestic environment. A notable example is the mass demonstration in Jakarta following the Qur'an burning incident in Sweden, which drew widespread condemnation and public mobilization. As one expert noted:

The instability of security conditions in the country due to the impact of Islamophobia in Europe is something that is feared ... As a result, there are always riots, protests, or clashes in Muslim-majority countries following the Qur'an burning incident in Europe. Moreover, the domestic security situation prepares for elections (Dianti, 2023).

Public outrage is becoming a regular occurrence demanding actions against Islamophobia. Hundreds of Muslims marched to the Swedish Embassy in Jakarta to protest the Quran burning by two far-right activists in Sweden and the Netherlands (VOA 2023). They also carried placards reading "Only Evil Burnt the Quran," "We Stand for Islam," and "Islamophobia Go to Hell." More than 300 demonstrators crowded the main thoroughfare in downtown Jakarta and burned a portrait of Danish anti-Muslim activist Rasmus Paludan along with Swedish, Danish, and Dutch flags. The demonstrators were generally members of Islamic groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), The National Movement of the Guardians of the Indonesian Ulema Council's Fatwa (GNPF-MUI), and the 212 Alumni Brotherhood. PA 212 Chairman Abdul Qohar addressed the crowd to boycott companies' products from the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark. Another orator issued a louder statement to require President Jokowi's government to cut diplomatic relations with Sweden, the Netherlands, and Denmark. In fact, previously, the Indonesian government had strongly condemned the act of Qur'an burning by Paludan. It was also conveyed on its official Twitter account on January 21, 2023: "Indonesia strongly condemns the act of burning the holy Qur'an by Rasmus Paludan, a Swedish politician, in Stockholm" (CNBC Indonesia, 2023).

Under public pressure, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs deemed it necessary to represent the public opinion of the Indonesian Muslim community to avoid discontent with the government and acts of violence when dealing with Islamophobic incidents in the West. Therefore, it then called for the Indonesian government to represent the Indonesian Muslim community to voice the case internationally (Bayuni, personal communication, August 12, 2023; Sahal, personal communication, September 3, 2023; Salim, personal communication, September 12, 2023). To prevent unrest and ensure social harmony, the government has taken steps to provide rapid responses to all manifestations of Islamophobia and to demonstrate its commitment to maintaining interreligious peace within society. One of the initiatives taken by the government is through public diplomacy in collaboration with Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, a moderate Islamic organization, to convince the public not to carry out demonstrations on the streets and convince the public that the issue of Islamophobia abroad has been sufficiently entrusted to professionals or the government (Bayuni, personal communication, August 12, 2023).

In the education sector, Indonesia established the Indonesian International Islamic University (IIIU) in 2016 as a presidential national strategic project under the direct supervision of Jusuf Kalla, Vice President of Indonesia (2014–2019), as the Board of Trustees. During a seminar organized by the International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID), which was attended by prominent figures including MUI Chairman Miftachul Akhyar, PBNU Chairman Yahya Cholil Staquf, and Muhammadiyah Chairman Haedar Nashir, as well as the Indonesian Ambassadors to Pakistan, Tunisia, and Malaysia, along with the Pakistani Ambassador, Malaysian Ambassador, and Tunisian Ambassador to Indonesia, Vice President Ma'ruf Amin explained that the establishment of IIIU forms an integral part of Indonesia's diplomatic efforts to become a center for the development of moderate Islam in the world (Sekretariat Negara, 2022). IIIU is envisioned to function as a laboratory for fostering proactive discourse about Islam, addressing the prevailing perception within the Western world that associates Islam primarily with Middle Eastern countries. In its development, IIIU has collaborated with many reputable universities in the World and presented world-renowned professors from Western universities to explore the problems of the Islamic world (Sahal, personal communication, September 3, 2023).

System

Indonesia has employed multifaceted strategies to address Islamophobia, emphasizing its identity as a proponent of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*—a moderate and peaceful Islamic tradition. Since 2004, Indonesia has sought to project an image of Islam that underscores peace, tolerance, and harmony, aligning with its domestic and international initiatives (Alvian & Ardhani, 2023; Saragih et al., 2020). These efforts are not only aimed at addressing Islamophobia but also at enhancing Indonesia's role as a global leader in Islamic moderation. Indonesia's dual approach involves disseminating moderate Islamic values and crafting policies to navigate challenges faced by the global Muslim community (*ummah*), such as combating extremism and mitigating Islamophobia (Baihaqie, 2017, pp. 160–161).

Indonesian diplomacy in promoting moderate Islam in most interfaith dialogue agendas, particularly with Western countries, has received positive responses and is instrumental in promoting understanding to minimize Islamophobia. For instance, in 2010, at the ASEAN-United States Summit, which took place on September 24 in New York and was opened by President Barack Obama, Indonesia sought member countries to jointly eliminate the symptoms of "Islamophobia." The Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia (2009–2014) Boediono stated to the press in New York, United States that: "We are signaling there are symptoms of 'Islamophobia', which I think we do not want, and I suggest ASEAN and U.S. members jointly work to eliminate it" (Antara News, 2010). Boediono further emphasized the importance of interfaith dialogue and advancing religious tolerance. He also highlighted the necessity of better explaining Islam to its adherents, particularly in countries with a Muslim majority. All delegations highly welcomed Indonesia's invitation without exception. Indonesia also thanked US President Barack Obama for his positive role in urging not to burn the Qur'an, which happened on September 11 by certain parties (BBC, 2010).

Indonesia's strong track record in promoting peace and dialogue led to its appointment as Co-Chair of the OIC Contact Group on Peace and Dialogue (CGPD), launched on the sidelines of the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly on September 23, 2019. The initiative to establish the CGPD was originally proposed by President Joko Widodo during the OIC Emergency Summit on Al-Quds Al-Sharif, hosted in Jakarta in 2016. The establishment of the Group was later endorsed by the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers in Abu Dhabi (March 2019) and formalized at the OIC Summit in Mecca (May 2019).. It was convened to endorse the draft Plan of Action on Combating Islamophobia, Religious Discrimination, Intolerance, and Hatred towards Muslims 2020–2023. This draft was discussed and agreed upon by the First Meeting of the OIC Working Group on Peace and Dialogue in Jakarta on July 29–30, 2019. Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi said that the Action Plan is used as a reference for the actions and voluntary work of OIC countries in overcoming Islamophobia in the world today. This Indonesia initiative was born out of concern over the increasing number of acts of violence based on primordial sentiments, including the 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks in New Zealand (Kementrian Luar Negeri, RI, 2019). While chairing the OIC Contact Group on Peace and Dialogue on the sidelines of the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly in New York, USA, September 23, 2019, Marsudi firmly stated in her speech:

The trend of hate speech, bigotry, and intolerance towards Islam continues to rise. Politically charged rhetoric hating Muslim groups that are incompatible with democratic values and pluralism is becoming increasingly concerning. Member states of OIC must advocate for the true values of Islam in every room and building of the United Nations (Antara News, 2019).

To counter rising Islamophobia in the West, Indonesia has extended its foreign policy to include robust bilateral and multilateral engagements with Western countries. Recognizing the prevalence of Islamophobia in these regions, Indonesia has focused its diplomatic efforts on rectifying misperceptions of Islam through multi-track diplomacy (E. M. Bayuni, personal communication, August 12, 2023; see Diamond & McDonald, 1996). Indonesia's government-to-government diplomacy involves leveraging bilateral relations to address Islamophobic incidents. Indonesia has consistently condemned Islamophobia through statements with the OIC and unilateral diplomacy. For instance, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry summoned ambassadors from France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, and India following various Islamophobic incidents, including inflammatory statements and acts of Qur'an desecration (NU, 2020; Okezone, 2023; Cahyani, 2023; Sorongan, 2022). These measures signal Indonesia's commitment to protecting Islamic values and countering Islamophobia on the global stage.

Under Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda, Indonesia adopted a "total diplomacy" strategy, engaging non-state actors alongside state-level initiatives to address Islamophobia. Collaborations with influential civil society organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, have been central to these efforts (Alvian & Ardhani, 2023). For instance, the Conference of Islamic Scholars (ICIS) and the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders have served as platforms to disseminate moderate Islamic narratives globally (Baihaqie, 2017). Nahdlatul Ulama has emerged as a key partner in promoting interfaith dialogue and addressing Islamophobia. Initiatives such as the ICIS conferences and

collaborations with international organizations reflect Indonesia's commitment to fostering global peace and understanding. Similarly, Muhammadiyah, through the World Peace Forum, has contributed to dialogues on identity, multiculturalism, and democracy, which are pivotal in countering Islamophobia (Antara News, 2016; Bayt ar-Rahmah, n.d.; Baihaqie, 2017). For track 1 initiatives, Nahdlatul Ulama has maintained close collaboration with Jakarta, including its embassies in different countries. Within Indonesia, the organization works closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Religion, and external with the Muslim communities in different countries, including the European Council for Fatwa and Research, and the Netherlands-Indonesia Consortium for Muslim-Christian Relations (Taufiq et al., 2022).

The Indonesian diaspora plays a significant role in countering Islamophobia in Western countries. For example, Nahdlatul Ulama's Special Branch (PCINU) in Europe and North America actively promotes moderate Islam through educational programs, interfaith dialogues, and public diplomacy initiatives. In the Netherlands, PCINU collaborates with the Indonesian Embassy and local institutions to combat Islamophobia and promote *Islam Nusantara* (Taufiq et al., 2022). Similarly, PCINU Belgium utilizes cultural centers to showcase harmonious Islamic traditions, thereby challenging negative stereotypes (NU, 2021). In the United States and Canada, Nahdlatul Ulama has facilitated interfaith dialogues and established platforms to foster understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. These efforts include advocacy through organizations such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Muslim Public Affairs Council, which address Islamophobia through legal and social media campaigns (Devina, 2022).

Indonesian imams and religious leaders have also contributed to these efforts. Programs such as the West Java and Central Java initiatives, which send imams to Western countries, promote *wasathiyah* Islam (moderate Islam) and challenge Islamophobic narratives (Metro TV, 2023a; SuaraBaru, 2022). Prominent figures like Shamsi Ali in the United States have furthered these objectives through media outreach and public discussions. In this regard, Pribadi Sutiono, who has worked at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for nearly 30 years and has extensively dealt with issues of Islamophobia, emphasized the importance of Indonesia sending imams and khatibs (preachers) to Western countries. He highlighted his experience when he was involved in the UK-Indonesia Islamic Advisory Group, while serving as the Counselor for Information and Social Cultural Affairs at the Indonesian Embassy in London (see Kemenag, 2007; Antaranews.com, 2007).

One of the objectives of establishing the Indonesia-UK Islamic Advisory Group was to advise the British on how to deal with Islam itself. In this group, we organized an exchange program for khatibs and imams between Indonesia and the UK. This initiative was necessary because, in the UK, many of the imams in mosques are imported, with most of them coming from countries such as Yemen, Egypt, and even Pakistan. They are often perceived as having a non-moderate understanding of Islam or even being associated with hardline Muslim groups. Through this program, we aimed to introduce the concept of Islam *rahmatan lil 'alamin* and address Islamophobia in the West (Sutiono, personal communication, August 10, 2023).

A Case Study of Pakistan

Individual

The role of individual leaders is pivotal in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy, especially concerning its response to Islamophobia. Imran Khan's tenure as Prime Minister (2018–2022) marked a significant shift in rhetoric and policy direction. Central to Khan's vision was his concept of *Riasat-e-Madina*—an idealized Islamic welfare state inspired by the governance model of the Prophet Muhammad—which served as a cornerstone of his domestic politics (Ahmed, 2022). Hence, the relationship with Muslim leaders like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and tilt towards Türkiye tied well with Khan's Islamization. He took many steps for this, including the establishment of a university to teach Sufi Islam, i.e., Al Qadir University, translation and broadcasting of a popular Turkish drama 'Diriliş: Ertuğrul' via the Pakistani Television. With Erdoğan, Khan also agreed to start a TV channel to counter Islamophobia (Shah, 2022). This vision reinforced Khan's populist appeal, enabling him to frame his leadership within the context of Islamic values and welfare while strongly using religion as a unifying and mobilizing force within Pakistan (Ahmed, Z.S., 2024). A thorough analysis of Imran Khan's speeches at international forums argued:

The practice of populist narratives in foreign policy has remained a substantial feature of Pakistani politics as political and state elite are used to employing such political discourses to attract masses for political and electoral advantages. However, these political discourses originating from populist narratives are not just confined to domestic politics but developed consequences for foreign policy choices of Pakistan (Falki and Asrar, 2023, p. 91).

As a populist leader, Khan capitalized on his image as a champion of Pakistan's sovereignty and a critic of external influences, particularly Western policies. His populist drive, characterized by anti-Western rhetoric, was central to his political strategy and governance, aligning domestic and foreign policy objectives with a critique of Western hegemony and interventionism (Afzal & Hassan, 2021). Internationally, Khan's leadership framed Islamophobia as a pressing global issue, demanding urgent international attention. This approach reflected his broader ideological commitment to protecting Muslim identity and advocating for Muslim rights worldwide. By intertwining his domestic vision of Riasat-e-Madina with a proactive stance against Islamophobia, Khan sought to position Pakistan as a defender of Muslim causes globally. His emphasis on systemic bias and discrimination faced by Muslims, particularly in Western countries, demonstrated how religious identity, both domestically and internationally, was central to his political narrative and governance style (Afzal & Hassan, 2021).

At the United Nations General Assembly in 2019, Khan explicitly criticized the West's portrayal of Islam post-9/11, arguing that terms such as "radical Islam" and "Islamic terrorism" perpetuated harmful stereotypes that criminalized entire Muslim communities. He asserted, "This Islamophobia kept growing and the reason was—I am sorry to say—we the Muslim countries did not do anything to check this wrong narrative" (Hassan 2022). This criticism extended to Muslim leaders, whom he accused of failing to

counter the misrepresentation of Islam. Hence, Khan made it his personal mission to explain Islam to the West, therefore, Shah claims that “he is the first [Pakistani] leader to be so interested in explaining Islam to the West” (2022, p. 113–114). He consistently highlighted incidents like the Christchurch Mosque shootings in New Zealand as emblematic of the consequences of unchecked Islamophobia and critiqued the apologetic stance adopted by many Muslims in the West. By noticing the negative role of social media in terms of the spread of Islamophobia, Khan wrote a letter to Facebook to ban Islamophobic content. In this letter, originally published via his X account, he wrote: “Given the rampant abuse and vilification of Muslims on social media platforms, I would ask you to place a similar ban on Islamophobia and hate against Islam for Facebook that you have put in place for the Holocaust” (BBC, 2020).

State

Islamic identity is deeply embedded in Pakistan’s national fabric, influencing its domestic framework and foreign policy. As an Islamic Republic, Pakistan’s ideological foundation rests on its commitment to Islamic principles, articulated through key constitutional milestones. The Objectives Resolution of 1949, incorporated into the 1956 Constitution, declared sovereignty belonging to Allah and established the centrality of Islam in governance (Ahmed, 2023). The 1973 Constitution further institutionalized this identity, explicitly prioritizing Pakistan’s relations with Muslim states. Article 40 of the Constitution emphasizes fostering unity and solidarity among Muslim nations and supporting shared interests within the global Muslim community. This constitutional commitment reinforces Pakistan’s pan-Islamic foreign policy, which champions causes like the Palestinian struggle and Kashmiri self-determination while actively engaging with the OIC. These measures underscore Pakistan’s role as a proponent of Islamic solidarity and its aspiration to lead efforts for greater cohesion within the Ummah (Ahmed and Akbarzadeh, 2023). A research participant, a former ambassador of Pakistan, argued that “Pakistan’s commitment to safeguarding the rights and interests of Muslims globally shapes its foreign policy” (Khalid, personal communication, November 2, 2023).

The state-level analysis focuses on domestic political structures, societal values, and the role of key institutions in shaping foreign policy. In Pakistan, Islamophobia has been a consistent theme across the political spectrum, reflecting the centrality of Islamic identity in the country’s domestic and foreign policy agenda. The 2018 election manifestos of major political parties highlight the emphasis on pan-Islamism and relations with the Ummah, although each party approached these issues with varying priorities and strategies. For instance, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) committed to integrating Islamic principles into governance and foreign policy, making it the only party to explicitly link Islamic values with its broader policy objectives (CPSD 2018). The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), while similarly emphasizing strong relations with the Muslim world, adopted different approaches. The PML-N focused on fostering ties with specific states within the Ummah, such as the Gulf States, Iran, Turkey, and Central Asian Republics (PML-N 2018). The PPP, on the other hand,

uniquely addressed Islamophobia in its manifesto, pledging to combat rising hostility against Muslims through engagement with the OIC and other Islamic platforms. The party's manifesto stated:

PPP will give a new direction to Pakistan's Muslim World foreign policy by creating targeted approaches and outreach for each of the Islamic regional blocs by plugging our valuable national ideas and assets in these new and emerging Muslim markets. We will work jointly with OIC members and other Islamic platforms to combat terrorism, radicalisation, including Islamophobia, and rising incidents of hatred and hostility against Muslims around the world (PPP 2018, p. 58).

During Khan's tenure, Pakistan's diplomatic efforts to counter Islamophobia gained prominence. In his 2020 virtual address to the UN General Assembly, Khan proposed the declaration of an 'International Day to Combat Islamophobia,' a resolution that was later championed by Pakistan's representatives at the UN (MOFA 2020). Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the UN, Munir Akram, articulated the rationale for this initiative, stating that acts of discrimination and hostility against Muslims "constitute grave violations of their human rights and violate their freedom of religion and belief" (MOFA 2022). Khan's government consistently framed Islamophobia being caused by of "hate speech and lack of knowledge and disinformation," calling for efforts to build a better understanding of Islam globally. As noted in a statement by Pakistan's Foreign Office:

The scourge of Islamophobia, fuelled by hate speech and lack of knowledge and disinformation, is causing unimaginable suffering to Muslim minorities around the world… Through the observance of this day, we want to build a better understanding of Islam and Islamic precepts (MOFA 2022).

Local pressure groups, particularly religious parties and organizations have played a significant role in foreign policy decision-making to counter Islamophobia. Between 2020 and 2021, widespread protests erupted across Pakistan, fueled by blasphemous acts in Europe. These protests gained extensive media coverage, with the most notable demonstrations in April 2021, organized by the previously banned Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). The TLP protests were marked by symbolic acts of defiance, such as burning effigies of French President Emmanuel Macron and the French flag, alongside demands to boycott French goods and expel the French ambassador from Pakistan (Baloch 2021). Public sentiment plays a pivotal role in shaping Pakistan's approach to Islamophobia, reflecting the country's deeply religious society and sensitivity toward perceived threats to Islam and Muslims. Global instances of Islamophobia often ignite widespread outrage in Pakistan, pressuring the government to take a firm stand. Islamophobia not only poses a moral challenge regarding the protection of Muslims worldwide but also represents an ideological issue, as Pakistan's identity is deeply rooted in Islamic principles. A former High Commissioner of Pakistan in Sri Lanka highlighted this connection in an interview, stating:

The primary drivers that shape Pakistan's foreign policies in relation to Islamophobia in the West and beyond are its Islamic identity and concerns for the Pakistani diaspora living in many countries abroad. In addition, the discrimination faced by Muslims in most Western countries (Hashmat, personal communication, October 30, 2024).

System

At the system level, a variety of factors influence Pakistan's external engagement regarding Islamophobia. Those include its pan-Islamist inclinations of its foreign policy and role in Muslim organizations like the OIC, bilateral relations within and outside the Muslim world, and a sizeable Pakistani diaspora in the West.

Migration trends further illustrate this dynamic. Limited opportunities within Pakistan, combined with better prospects abroad, have led to significant emigration. In 2020, there were 6.3 million Pakistani immigrants, with the largest community in Saudi Arabia (Ahmed, J., 2024). This diaspora plays a crucial role in Pakistan's economy, contributing US$76 billion in remittances in 2023 (Rizvi, 2024). Pakistan's diplomatic missions maintain strong ties with the diaspora, not only to encourage investment in the country but also to address their challenges. In the context of Islamophobia, the Pakistani American community has organized protests and collaborated with organizations like the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). CAIR, a prominent US-based advocacy group, regularly shares data on anti-Muslim bias. In 2023, it recorded over 8,000 complaints of anti-Muslim incidents, marking a 56% increase from 2022. Facing discrimination, many Pakistani Muslims turn to their diplomatic missions for support, further reinforcing Pakistan's proactive stance on global Islamophobia.

Pakistan is among the leading states actively addressing the issue of Islamophobia through diplomacy. It has utilized its diplomatic channels effectively to promote harmony within the Muslim world and counter the global rise in anti-Muslim sentiments. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued numerous statements condemning Islamophobic incidents globally. For instance, MOFA issued statements condemning terrorism disguised as freedom of expression and called for joint efforts against Islamophobia at the UN Forum on Minority Issues in Geneva in November 2019. Pakistan has also engaged in bilateral discussions with Muslim and non-Muslim countries to foster interfaith harmony and combat extremism. Islamophobia has become a cornerstone of Pakistan's bilateral diplomacy, reflected in its engagements with countries such as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. High-level engagements among Pakistan, Turkey, and Malaysia have focused on developing coordinated strategies to combat Islamophobia. Pakistan has stressed the need for a unified Islamic counter-narrative (Nasir, 2019). This English-language channel initiative was proposed during a trilateral meeting at the 74th UNGA in New York.[1]

Pakistan has also played a significant role in multilateral forums. In 2020, Pakistan addressed Islamophobia during a meeting of the Group of Friends of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) commemorating its 15th anniversary. Co-hosted by the Foreign Ministers of Spain and Turkey and chaired by the UNAOC High Representative, this virtual gathering highlighted Pakistan's active role in countering Islamophobia on international platforms. Pakistan's foreign policy stance on Islamophobia is further evident through official channels such as MOFA, the National Assembly, and the Senate. In November 2022, Pakistan's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Hina Rabbani Khar, addressed the 9th UNAOC Global Forum in Fez, Morocco, expressing grave concerns about rising global religious

intolerance, violence, and Islamophobia. She highlighted the discrimination and hostility faced by Muslims, often perpetuated with impunity by certain states, and urged the global community, particularly the United Nations, to develop an actionable plan to combat anti-Muslim hatred due to its documented widespread impact (APP, 2022). Building on these efforts, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari marked the "International Day to Combat Islamophobia" at a special United Nations event on March 10, 2023. He emphasized Islam's principles of moderation, tolerance, and pluralism, recalling how the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) instructed Muslims to treat everyone with dignity and respect regardless of race, culture, gender, or religion. He noted:

The unfounded phobia of Islam and its adherents is a sad reality of our times. Since colonial times, entrenched notions that depict Muslims and their beliefs as cultural 'others' and 'threats' have served to perpetuate, validate, and normalize Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred. Since the tragedy of 9/11, animosity and institutional suspicion of Muslims and Islam across the world have only escalated to epidemic proportions (United Nations Türkiye, 2023).

On March 8, 2023, Pakistan's Foreign Minister chaired a conference in New York titled "Women in Islam: Exploring Women's Rights and Identity in the Islamic World." Coinciding with the 67th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, this conference, organized under Pakistan's leadership as chair of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers, sought to address misconceptions about women's rights in Islam (OIC, 2023). It also showcased the achievements of influential Muslim women and proposed an annual policy dialogue to overcome obstacles and empower women across OIC countries. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari stressed the importance of distinguishing between Islamic principles and patriarchal societal norms, stating: "It offends me as a Muslim and a Pakistani to the core of my heart that the face of Islam, unfortunately, in much of Western public perception, are the likes of Osama Bin Laden" (The Express Tribune, 2023).

During parliamentary discussions, lawmakers consistently stressed the importance of promoting interfaith harmony and addressing Islamophobia as a prerequisite for international peace. Like Indonesia's efforts, Pakistan is also gradually emphasizing on spreading the awareness of Islam and Islamophobia. Since the declaration of the international day in 2022, Pakistan's diplomatic missions organize events to spread awareness on Islamophobia. Also, Pakistan's UN mission organized a conference on "Women in Islam: Understanding the Rights and Identity of Women in the Islamic World" in New York on 8 March 2022. This event was organized by Pakistan in its capacity as the chair of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers (Radio Pakistan, 2023). Fieldwork insights also highlight the effectiveness of Pakistan's advocacy against Islamophobia. Ambassador Masood Khalid noted that Pakistan's collaboration with other Muslim nations has led to tangible results, such as debates in Western countries like Denmark on laws restricting Qur'an burning (Khalid, personal communication, November 2, 2023). This culminated in Denmark passing legislation to ban Qur'an burning in December 2023, reflecting a shift in its stance on freedom of expression. However, limitations persist. A Lahore-based academic, Fatima Sajjad, observed inconsistencies in Pakistan's foreign policy due to shifts in military ideologies. She explained: "When the military sees pan-Islamism as Pakistan's ideology

(1980s/90s), foreign policy is shaped accordingly. When the military advocates 'enlightened moderation,' we see a shift" (Sajjad, personal communication, June 1, 2024).

Since 9/11, Pakistan has been facing multiple and mounting challenges ranging from terrorism to economic and political crisis. In the first two decades of this century, more than 83,000 Pakistanis died because of terrorism, and its economic situation has only worsened because of bad government and the lack security (Jamal, 2021). This has made Pakistan economically dependent on Western states and dominated institutions like the International Monetary Fund. Due to this, many Pakistani participants argues that Pakistan is unable to do more regarding Islamophobia. Pakistan's former ambassador Azam Khan said, "the challenges Pakistan faces in balancing its principles stance on Islamophobia with its economic dependencies on Western countries" (Khan, personal communication, November 2, 2023). Former ambassador Touqir Hussain further elaborated:

A dependent foreign policy is restrictive and addictive, robbing the country of the freedom to find new allies. It is also a disincentive to developing one's own national strength. It made Islamabad complacent that being geopolitically too important, a nuclear power too risky to fail, and its services too indispensable, Pakistan did not need to diversify its friends or develop its own strength. This made it vulnerable to exploitation (Hussain, 2022).

Conclusion

The responses of Indonesia and Pakistan to counter Islamophobia reveal key distinctions in their domestic and external approaches. Domestically, populist leaders like Indonesia's President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan have strategies by emphasizing religious identity in their political narratives. Jokowi's leadership, supported by Vice President Ma'ruf Amin and organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, actively integrated moderate Islam into domestic and foreign policy, leveraging it to enhance Indonesia's global standing. Similarly, Imran Khan frequently invoked Islamic values and identity in his political rhetoric, particularly by framing the global fight against Islamophobia as a moral and political imperative for Pakistan. Both leaders used religion not only to address domestic constituencies but also to position their countries in broader international discourses on Islam.

However, the divergence in external engagement strategies highlights critical differences in their foreign policy decision-making. Indonesia's comprehensive strategy emphasizes promoting moderate Islam through transnational networks and multilateral diplomacy. Jokowi's administration has positioned Indonesia as a global advocate for interfaith harmony and a leader in addressing Islamophobia, using platforms like international conferences and bilateral partnerships to project this narrative. In contrast, Pakistan's external engagement has been constrained by several factors, including its economic dependence on the West. This reliance has limited Islamabad's ability to adopt a more proactive stance in global debates on Islamophobia. Instead, Pakistan has primarily focused on multilateral organizations like the OIC and the United Nations to voice its concerns. While Pakistan's military, a significant player in

foreign policy, aligns with civilian leadership on this issue, the country's engagement remains largely reactive and narrowly defined. This divergence reflects deeper structural and institutional differences. Indonesia's pluralistic society and active civil society networks have provided a robust foundation for proactive diplomacy. Meanwhile, Pakistan's centralized decision-making, shaped by its military and religious institutions, alongside its economic vulnerabilities, has resulted in a more constrained and multilateral-focused approach.

Declarations

Ethics Approval.

Yes. This research was approved by the Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia. We only attribute the participants who have given prior approval.

Informed Consent.

Yes.

Conflict of Interest.

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Author Contribution

Z, J, and A contributed to the study as follows: Z and J led grant writing and conceptualization; Z and A conducted data collection and analysis; Z and A drafted the main manuscript. All authors contributed to editing and revision, and reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Footnotes

1. As of December 2025, the channel has not been established; the last official update dates to 2021, when Pakistan announced the appointment of focal persons to advance the project (Pakistan Today, 2021).

Supplementary Files

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- Annex1.docx