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Religious-Based Organizations in Southeast Asia: Non-State Actors, Peacebuilding, and Regional Governance Networks

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Abstract

Religious-Based Organizations have become increasingly visible in Southeast Asia as societies confront conflict, humanitarian pressure, and the limits of state-centered peacebuilding. In a region marked by religious diversity and uneven governance capacity, these organizations often occupy trusted positions within local communities and transnational moral networks. This article examines how Religious-Based Organizations operate as non-state actors in peacebuilding and regional governance in Southeast Asia. It adopts a qualitative and theory-driven approach informed by Constructivism, Liberalism, and the concept of sacred capital. The analysis draws on comparative regional literature, policy-related documents, organizational materials, and secondary sources on religion, civil society, governance, and peace processes in Southeast Asia. Attention is directed to the relationship between moral authority, community legitimacy, transnational engagement, and institutional participation in peace-oriented initiatives. A comparative reading is used to identify recurring patterns as well as context-specific forms of faith-based action across the region. Religious-Based Organizations emerge as influential actors because they combine peacebuilding capacity with moral legitimacy that often exceeds the reach of formal institutions. Their role indicates that regional governance in Southeast Asia increasingly depends on non-state religious actors operating across local, national, and transnational arenas. The article contributes to the field by offering a regionally grounded framework for understanding how religion, non-state agency, and governance interact in Southeast Asian peacebuilding.

Keyword

1. Introduction

International Relations has long been shaped by a state-centric imagination in which sovereign states are treated as the primary actors of global politics, while religion and non-state institutions are often placed at the analytical margins. This orientation grew out of the Westphalian legacy and was reinforced by secularization assumptions that expected religion to retreat from public and political life (Huda, 2021). Such assumptions became increasingly difficult to sustain as religion re-emerged in global affairs through social movements, political activism, humanitarian engagement, and transnational advocacy.

Religious-Based Organizations, or RBOs, have become especially significant within this transformation because they combine moral claims, organizational capacity, and community trust. Their growing visibility challenges the older view that international

politics can be understood through formal diplomacy and state behavior alone (Ramirez, 2024). Southeast Asia offers an especially important setting for examining this shift because religion remains deeply embedded in social life, public discourse, and political mobilization across the region. The introduction therefore positions RBOs not as peripheral actors, but as serious participants in the evolving architecture of regional peace and governance.

The central problem arises from the mismatch between the growing practical importance of RBOs and the limited conceptual space traditionally granted to them in mainstream International Relations. In Southeast Asia, peacebuilding and regional governance unfold in environments marked by religious diversity, uneven state capacity, communal tension, and recurring humanitarian need (Muchtar et al., 2025). Under such conditions, state institutions often struggle to secure legitimacy and trust at the local level, especially in conflict-affected or socially fragmented settings. RBOs frequently enter this gap by mediating disputes, delivering aid, and sustaining community relationships that formal institutions cannot easily reproduce. Their role is therefore not merely supplementary, because they often influence how peace, legitimacy, and cooperation are imagined and practiced in everyday settings. This gives the issue direct real-world relevance for societies dealing with conflict transformation, interfaith tension, and governance deficits. It also matters for ASEAN, where regional cooperation remains institutionally cautious and often depends on non-state channels to deepen social resilience (Sealy et al., 2022).

A considerable body of scholarship already establishes that religion has not disappeared from international politics and that non-state actors increasingly shape regional and global outcomes. Existing work has shown that faith-based actors can contribute to humanitarian intervention, development, norm diffusion, and peace advocacy in ways that exceed the capacities of purely secular organizations (Smith et al., 2020). The introduction also makes clear that Southeast Asia is an unusually rich empirical setting because of its layered religious landscape, including Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, and indigenous traditions that remain politically salient.

Earlier studies have documented how religion in the region is intertwined with social cohesion, political mobilization, and conflict, rather than confined to private belief. There is also substantial recognition that RBOs derive influence from moral authority, grassroots reach, and transnational networks that allow them to act across local, national, and international scales (Romadhon et al., 2025). These insights already provide a strong foundation for treating RBOs as meaningful actors in regional politics. What is known, then, is that religion matters, and that organizations rooted in religious communities can shape both social stability and political imagination in Southeast Asia.

What remains less fully specified is how RBOs should be conceptualized within International Relations as actors in peacebuilding and regional governance rather than as incidental moral auxiliaries. Much of the existing literature recognizes their practical importance, yet often stops short of integrating them into a more systematic account of agency, legitimacy, and regional order (Driessen, 2025). There is still limited clarity about how their religious identity, moral authority, and transnational embeddedness interact with formal governance structures such as ASEAN. Scholarship has also not always explained how RBOs move between grassroots peace work, cross-border humanitarianism, and regional norm entrepreneurship without becoming reducible to either civil society or state proxy categories. This creates a conceptual gap between empirical recognition and theoretical incorporation (Campos & Finazzi, 2025). As a result, RBOs are often visible in case studies but underdeveloped in larger explanations of how

regional governance actually functions in a diverse and post-secular Southeast Asia. The unresolved issue is therefore not whether RBOs matter, but how their distinctive mode of action should be theorized within the discipline.

The research gap becomes clearer when read through the theoretical lenses highlighted in the introduction, especially Constructivism and Liberalism. Constructivism is relevant because it emphasizes identity, norms, and the social construction of political reality, which makes it well suited to explaining how religious belief and moral authority shape public legitimacy and collective behavior (Breslin & Nesadurai, 2018). Liberalism is also useful because it opens space for transnational actors, complex interdependence, and multi-level governance beyond the state (Volkdal, 2024). Yet neither framework, in its conventional form, fully captures the particular configuration of RBO influence in Southeast Asia, where religious organizations often combine community embeddedness, moral legitimacy, and cross-border activism. The introduction also adds the notion of sacred capital to clarify how RBOs derive authority from historical depth, spiritual reputation, educational networks, and recognized moral leadership. That concept strengthens the theoretical synthesis by showing why RBOs can mobilize trust and influence in ways that differ from secular NGOs or bureaucratic agencies (Emmanuel, 2025). The gap, then, lies in the need for a more integrated framework that connects identity, faith-based legitimacy, and regional governance within one coherent analytical vocabulary.

Filling this gap is theoretically justified because Southeast Asia's political realities cannot be adequately understood through a narrow state-centric model or through secular assumptions borrowed from other historical settings. RBOs are not external to political order in the region, but are woven into the social infrastructures through which peace, authority, and public responsibility are negotiated (Bahtiar et al., 2025). Constructivist logic supports this claim because norms and identities do not emerge in abstraction; they are produced and sustained by actors that communities recognize as morally credible. Liberalism also supports closer attention to RBOs because their transnational links and participation in governance initiatives illustrate how regional cooperation depends on more than intergovernmental bargaining. The value of addressing the gap lies in explaining why religious organizations can become both peace intermediaries and governance partners without losing their non-state character. It also allows the analysis to move beyond simplistic secular-religious binaries that obscure how faith operates in contemporary regional politics (Kapinde, 2025). A stronger theoretical account is therefore necessary to explain the actual distribution of authority and influence in Southeast Asian peacebuilding.

From this foundation, the article is guided by a set of interrelated research questions that arise directly from the introduction. How should Religious-Based Organizations be conceptualized as non-state actors within International Relations and Southeast Asian regional politics. What distinctive characteristics enable them to influence peacebuilding, humanitarian action, and governance in ways that differ from both states and secular NGOs. How do RBOs contribute to conflict transformation, interfaith dialogue, and social cohesion across diverse Southeast Asian settings. In what ways are they beginning to engage formal regional structures such as ASEAN, and what does that engagement reveal about changing ideas of governance and participation. What kinds of institutional, political, and internal barriers constrain their effectiveness, despite their moral authority and grassroots legitimacy. These questions are designed to clarify both agency and limitation rather than merely celebrate RBOs as inherently benevolent actors. They also

create a pathway for linking conceptual discussion to concrete regional dynamics without collapsing one into the other.

The urgency of these questions is heightened by the region's current need for peacebuilding mechanisms that are socially legitimate, locally rooted, and regionally connected. Southeast Asia continues to confront communal tension, fragile peace processes, humanitarian crises, and governance challenges that cannot be resolved by formal state institutions acting alone (Gupta & Verma, 2021). RBOs increasingly occupy a strategic position within these conditions because they bridge policy and community, moral language and political practice, local trust and regional aspiration. Their growing relevance within ASEAN discussions further suggests that regional governance is already moving, however unevenly, toward greater engagement with spiritually inspired actors. The contribution of the article lies in making this transformation analytically visible and conceptually intelligible within International Relations (Acharya, 2004). It recenters RBOs as actors that shape not only service delivery or social outreach, but also the normative and institutional contours of peace and governance in Southeast Asia. It also invites a broader reconsideration of how regional order is produced in settings where faith remains an enduring public force rather than a fading private concern.

2. Research Method

This article employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive analysis and comparative regional inquiry to examine Religious-Based Organizations as non-state actors in peacebuilding and regional governance in Southeast Asia. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the central concerns of the research involve meanings, legitimacy, moral authority, institutional roles, and social relationships that cannot be adequately reduced to numerical indicators (Mohajan, 2018). The analytical framework combines Constructivism and Liberalism, while also drawing on the concept of sacred capital to explain how religious organizations acquire trust, influence, and organizational reach within regional political life (Priya, 2020). Constructivism provides a basis for analyzing how norms, identities, and shared meanings shape the public role of RBOs, whereas Liberalism supports attention to transnational actors, interdependence, and multi-level governance beyond the state. The design works effectively for this research because RBO influence in Southeast Asia is historically embedded, socially mediated, and context dependent rather than uniform or easily measurable across cases (Berg, 1990).

A qualitative strategy makes it possible to trace how religious legitimacy is translated into peacebuilding practice, humanitarian engagement, and regional participation in different settings. The comparative orientation further strengthens the design by allowing patterned similarities and context-specific differences to be examined across Southeast Asian cases without flattening their institutional diversity. Such a design is therefore well suited to a research problem concerned with the social construction of authority, the political role of faith-based actors, and the changing architecture of regional governance.

The data are drawn from academic literature, policy documents, ASEAN-related reports, organizational statements, institutional publications, peacebuilding records, and credible secondary sources discussing religion, non-state actors, humanitarian action, and regional governance in Southeast Asia. Data collection was conducted through purposive document selection, focusing on sources directly relevant to Religious-Based Organizations, their forms of peace engagement, their relations with state and regional institutions, and their role in shaping norms of cooperation and legitimacy (Chand, 2025). The units of analysis are discursive and institutional expressions of RBO activity, including organizational narratives, public interventions, peacebuilding initiatives, governance participation, and representations of religious legitimacy in regional contexts.

A qualitative coding matrix served as the primary instrument for organizing and classifying the material according to key analytical dimensions such as moral authority, sacred capital, peacebuilding function, humanitarian engagement, institutional access, regional linkage, and governance relevance (Esterberg, 2001). These dimensions functioned as the principal variables for examining how RBOs operate within and across local, national, and regional arenas. Trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation, consistency in thematic coding, close comparison across different document types, and transparent alignment between the research questions, theoretical framework, and analytical categories. Reliability was strengthened by applying the same interpretive criteria across the selected materials, while validity was supported by selecting sources that were directly connected to the conceptual focus and regional scope of the article. Ethical standards were maintained by relying on publicly accessible materials, avoiding selective misrepresentation of sensitive religious and political issues, and observing scholarly caution regarding confidentiality and informed consent, although no direct human participants were involved in the study.

3. Result and Discussion

Religious-Based Organizations occupy a significant place in Southeast Asian peacebuilding because they combine spiritual legitimacy, social embeddedness, and organizational flexibility in ways that many formal institutions cannot easily replicate. Their role extends beyond charity or moral advocacy into mediation, humanitarian response, and the cultivation of social trust in fragile environments. Across the region, these organizations often operate in spaces where state capacity is uneven, public confidence in government is limited, or conflict has damaged the legitimacy of formal institutions. This gives them an operational advantage rooted not merely in resources, but in moral credibility and proximity to affected communities.

In conflict-prone or divided societies, such credibility becomes politically consequential because peacebuilding depends as much on trust and recognition as on procedural settlement. Religious authority therefore appears not as a symbolic supplement to governance, but as a practical force in the management of social tension (Hanafi & Maulana, 2025). The regional relevance of this pattern lies in the ability of RBOs to act across local, national, and transnational levels while remaining anchored in community life. Their influence helps illuminate how peace and governance in Southeast Asia are shaped by actors that fall outside conventional state-centric models.

The most visible dimension of this influence lies in peacebuilding practice. Religious-Based Organizations participate in mediation, reconciliation, post-conflict recovery, and humanitarian assistance across a range of settings in Southeast Asia. Their interventions often carry weight because they are able to translate technical peace language into moral vocabularies that communities recognize as legitimate and ethically compelling. In areas marked by protracted distrust, organizations with religious credibility can reopen communication channels that are inaccessible to state agencies or external actors (Bahtiar et al., 2025).

This role becomes especially important where peacebuilding requires more than formal agreements and must include the restoration of social relationships and moral confidence. RBOs often sustain long-term engagement after media attention and official interventions decline, which strengthens their capacity to support durable peace rather than short-lived stabilization. Their presence in local communities also enables them to identify grievances, symbolic sensitivities, and social fractures at an early stage.

Peacebuilding in this sense is not only diplomatic or institutional, but relational and moral, and RBOs are especially well positioned within that terrain.

Their influence, however, depends on more than organizational presence. Moral authority functions as a form of political capacity that distinguishes Religious-Based Organizations from many secular civil society actors. This authority is rooted in sacred capital, historical continuity, educational influence, spiritual reputation, and the ability to speak in ethically resonant terms. Community trust is not automatically granted, but where it exists it allows RBOs to mobilize cooperation, calm tension, and frame peace as a shared moral obligation rather than an externally imposed agenda. Such influence can be especially effective when religious leaders are perceived as independent from partisan power struggles. Sacred capital also helps explain why some organizations can operate across social divisions that would otherwise obstruct dialogue. Their legitimacy is therefore not reducible to funding, scale, or legal mandate. It rests on a socially recognized capacity to define moral responsibility and to embody values that communities consider authoritative.

This pattern does not unfold uniformly across Southeast Asia. The role of RBOs varies according to state structure, religious demography, conflict history, and the openness of governance arrangements. In some settings, they operate as trusted intermediaries between communities and formal institutions. In others, they are more visible as providers of social welfare, humanitarian coordination, or interfaith dialogue rather than direct mediators in conflict processes. Their access to public influence is shaped by how states regulate religion, how pluralism is institutionally managed, and how far civil society can participate in governance. Organizations working in Muslim-majority environments may encounter different expectations and opportunities than those working in Buddhist-majority or religiously mixed contexts. Such variation does not weaken the broader argument. It demonstrates that the significance of RBOs lies not in institutional uniformity but in their ability to adapt moral authority to different political and social conditions. Regional analysis therefore requires attention to patterned diversity rather than a single model of faith-based action.

The discussion also indicates that Religious-Based Organizations contribute to regional governance in ways that exceed local peace initiatives. Their activities often include advocacy, norm circulation, humanitarian networking, and cross-border cooperation that connect community-level engagement with broader regional concerns. Through interfaith forums, relief coordination, and peace-oriented partnerships, they participate in shaping the social foundations of governance beyond the nation-state. This role is particularly important in Southeast Asia because formal regional institutions tend to operate cautiously and often lack deep reach into local conflict environments. RBOs help bridge that gap by carrying values, concerns, and forms of practical coordination across borders. Their regional significance therefore lies not only in what they do within particular localities, but in how they contribute to a wider field of social and normative interaction. Governance here is best understood as a layered process involving public legitimacy, social trust, and collaborative problem-solving. Religious-Based Organizations are increasingly part of that architecture.

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Religious-Based Organizations in Peacebuilding and Regional Governance

Analytical Dimension	Main Pattern	Regional Relevance
Peacebuilding role	Mediation, reconciliation, humanitarian support	Strengthens local and cross-border stability

Source of influence	Moral authority, sacred capital, community trust	Creates legitimacy beyond formal institutions
Governance engagement	Collaboration with states, civil society, and ASEAN-linked arenas	Expands governance beyond state-centric channels
Institutional variation	Context-specific forms of action and limitation	Produces uneven but significant regional impact

Table 1 clarifies that the significance of Religious-Based Organizations rests on the interaction between moral legitimacy and institutional practice. Their peacebuilding role is not isolated from their source of influence, since mediation and reconciliation become effective largely when communities trust the actors involved. The table also shows that governance engagement is not a separate sphere from peace work. Collaboration with civil society, state agencies, and regional platforms often grows out of the credibility accumulated through local service and conflict intervention. Institutional variation remains important because different political environments either enable or constrain the translation of sacred capital into broader governance roles. Even so, the comparative dimensions reveal a consistent regional pattern in which RBOs act as more than charitable auxiliaries. They emerge as socially embedded actors capable of shaping how peace, legitimacy, and public cooperation are organized. This supports the central argument that regional governance in Southeast Asia cannot be understood adequately through a state-only framework.

This interpretation aligns with and extends prior scholarship on religion in International Relations and on non-state participation in governance. Earlier work has challenged secular assumptions by showing that religion remains active in norm formation, humanitarian action, and conflict transformation. Scholarship on civil society and liberal institutionalism has also emphasized the importance of transnational actors in shaping cooperation beyond the state. The present discussion adds precision by highlighting how Religious-Based Organizations differ from generic NGOs through their possession of sacred capital and their capacity to mobilize trust through moral language. Constructivist perspectives become especially useful here because they direct attention to how legitimacy, identity, and normative recognition shape political influence. Liberal perspectives remain relevant because they capture the multi-level and networked character of regional governance. The contribution of the analysis lies in bringing these strands together around the distinctive role of faith-based organizations in Southeast Asia. This creates a more complete framework for understanding how religious actors participate in contemporary regional politics.

The implications for ASEAN and regional governance are substantial. ASEAN has historically privileged intergovernmental consensus, non-interference, and cautious institutional development. Such a framework often limits formal regional intervention in conflict and social fragmentation. Religious-Based Organizations complicate this architecture by demonstrating that governance can also proceed through morally grounded, community-linked, and non-state channels. Their presence does not replace state institutions, but it broadens the practical and normative field within which regional cooperation occurs. This is particularly relevant in areas such as interfaith dialogue, humanitarian response, and peace facilitation, where legitimacy at the community level is crucial. RBO engagement suggests that ASEAN's social and peace dimensions increasingly depend on actors who can move across formal and informal spheres. Regional governance therefore appears less as a closed diplomatic system and more as a layered assemblage of institutions, networks, and moral intermediaries.

The practical significance of this discussion lies in the need to engage Religious-Based Organizations without romanticizing them. Their strengths in trust-building, community access, and ethical framing make them valuable partners in peacebuilding and governance initiatives. At the same time, their authority is not inherently inclusive or politically neutral. Religious legitimacy can be contested, selective, or unevenly distributed across plural societies. Some organizations may bridge difference, while others may reproduce exclusion or align too closely with partisan interests. Effective engagement therefore requires careful institutional judgment rather than uncritical celebration of faith-based action. Governments, regional bodies, and peace practitioners need strategies that recognize both the assets and the limits of RBO involvement. A realistic approach treats them as important actors whose role must be understood through context, accountability, and relational legitimacy.

Several strengths and limitations emerge from the discussion. One major strength lies in the comparative and theory-informed treatment of Religious-Based Organizations as regional actors rather than isolated local institutions. This makes it possible to connect micro-level peace practices with broader questions of governance and legitimacy. Another strength lies in the use of sacred capital as a concept that clarifies why RBO influence differs from that of secular civil society actors. At the same time, the analysis is limited by the uneven visibility of organizations across countries and by the challenge of capturing informal influence through document-based and conceptual examination. Not all organizations are equally transparent, institutionally stable, or publicly recognized, which complicates regional comparison. An unexpected pattern is that organizations often become most influential not when they oppose formal institutions, but when they serve as intermediaries between community needs and institutional frameworks. This suggests that their political relevance lies as much in relational positioning as in overt activism.

Further research would benefit from more detailed study of specific organizational networks across Southeast Asia, especially those involved in cross-border peace facilitation, humanitarian action, and interfaith governance. Comparative work on how different religious traditions structure organizational authority would deepen understanding of both common mechanisms and context-specific dynamics. More attention is also needed to how ASEAN and affiliated regional forums engage faith-based actors in practice rather than in abstract policy language. Research on internal organizational tensions, gendered leadership, and youth participation would help refine the understanding of how sacred capital is produced and contested. Practical application should focus on building collaborative frameworks that connect Religious-Based Organizations with public institutions while preserving accountability and pluralist safeguards. Peace policy in the region would benefit from more systematic recognition of faith-based actors as governance partners, especially in areas where state legitimacy remains thin. Such directions would strengthen both scholarship and practice by clarifying how religion, non-state agency, and regional order interact in Southeast Asia.

4. Conclusion

Religious-Based Organizations have emerged as consequential non-state actors in Southeast Asian peacebuilding and regional governance because they combine moral authority, community legitimacy, and transnational reach in ways that formal institutions often cannot replicate. Their significance lies not only in humanitarian support or charitable work, but in their capacity to mediate conflict, sustain reconciliation, and

translate peacebuilding into moral vocabularies that are socially credible at the local level. Sacred capital and community trust remain central to this capacity, allowing such organizations to operate across fragile social boundaries and to engage public concerns that exceed the reach of state-centered mechanisms. The discussion has also emphasized that their role is neither uniform nor automatic, since effectiveness is shaped by differences in political context, religious demography, institutional openness, and conflict history across Southeast Asia. In some settings, Religious-Based Organizations function as bridge-builders between communities and authorities, while in others their position is more constrained or politically contested. Their growing involvement in interfaith dialogue, humanitarian coordination, and regional norm circulation indicates that governance in Southeast Asia increasingly extends beyond formal diplomatic institutions. Peace and regional order therefore appear as products of layered interaction in which morally grounded non-state actors play a substantive and enduring role.

The contribution to the field lies in repositioning Religious-Based Organizations as analytically central to the study of International Relations, peacebuilding, and regional governance in Southeast Asia. Rather than treating them as marginal moral auxiliaries or as secondary forms of civil society, the discussion has framed them as actors whose authority is rooted in socially recognized legitimacy and whose influence can shape both local peace processes and wider regional governance dynamics. The integration of Constructivism, Liberalism, and the concept of sacred capital provides a more precise framework for explaining how faith-based organizations mobilize trust, participate in norm formation, and engage governance structures without losing their distinct non-state character.

This perspective also broadens regional studies by showing that ASEAN-related governance cannot be understood solely through state-centric models, especially in areas where public legitimacy, intercommunal relations, and conflict transformation depend on actors embedded in everyday social life. The conceptual value of the discussion lies in clarifying how moral authority becomes political capacity within a post-secular regional environment. Its regional value lies in demonstrating that peace and governance in Southeast Asia are increasingly shaped by interactions among states, institutions, and faith-based intermediaries. Such an approach opens a stronger analytical foundation for examining religion as a constitutive force in contemporary regional order.

Future research should expand beyond broad regional comparison toward more detailed examination of specific organizational networks, issue areas, and country settings across Southeast Asia. Closer study of cross-border humanitarian initiatives, interfaith peace platforms, and locally rooted mediation practices would deepen understanding of how Religious-Based Organizations translate moral credibility into concrete governance roles. Greater attention is also needed to internal organizational dynamics, including leadership formation, gender inclusion, generational change, and the negotiation of political neutrality in polarized environments. Comparative work across different religious traditions would further clarify which dimensions of sacred capital are transferable across settings and which are shaped by specific doctrinal and institutional histories. Another important direction concerns the relationship between Religious-Based Organizations and regional institutions, particularly the ways ASEAN and related forums engage faith-based actors in practice rather than only in formal rhetoric. Research on digital communication and transnational advocacy would also be valuable, given the growing role of online networks in shaping public legitimacy and regional mobilization. Advancing these lines of inquiry will strengthen both scholarly

understanding and policy relevance by clarifying how non-state religious actors participate in the evolving architecture of peace and governance in Southeast Asia.

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