

Religious Soft Power and State Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Sacred Capital and Strategic Legitimacy

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Abstract

Religion has re-emerged as an important dimension of diplomacy as states increasingly mobilize moral narratives, sacred symbols, and religious institutions in international engagement. In Southeast Asia, this development is especially significant because religion remains deeply embedded in public legitimacy, political identity, and regional image formation. This article examines how religious soft power operates as a diplomatic resource in Southeast Asia and how sacred capital is translated into state influence. It adopts a qualitative and theory-driven approach informed by constructivism, soft power theory, and the concept of sacred capital. The analysis draws on comparative regional literature, official speeches, policy-related materials, and secondary sources on religion, diplomacy, and state identity. Attention is directed to the relationship between moral legitimacy, institutional credibility, domestic political coherence, and external diplomatic projection. A comparative reading is used to identify recurring patterns as well as variation across different national settings. Religious soft power emerges as effective when diplomatic narratives of moderation, harmony, or civilizational value are supported by credible institutions and coherent domestic practice. Religious diplomacy therefore functions as both an opportunity and a constraint, since external attraction depends on internal legitimacy. The article contributes to the field by offering a regionally grounded framework for understanding how religion, soft power, and state diplomacy intersect in Southeast Asia.

Keyword

religion; diplomacy; soft power; Southeast Asia

1. Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, International Relations treated religion as a receding force that belonged increasingly to the private sphere rather than to diplomacy, strategy, and interstate interaction. That assumption was sustained by the secularization thesis and by the post-Westphalian preference for rational, state-centered, and ostensibly secular models of world politics (Suorsa, 2024). Yet the return of religion to public and geopolitical life has made that older intellectual settlement increasingly difficult to defend. The Iranian Revolution, the rise of political Islam, and the broader visibility of faith-based actors exposed the limits of theories that had relegated religion to the margins of international analysis.

Religion now appears not as a residual cultural variable, but as a durable source of legitimacy, identity, and political imagination. This shift has created pressure to revisit some of the foundational assumptions of International Relations, especially those that



separate the secular from the religious too rigidly (Belousov & Krivdina, 2025; Öztürk, 2020). The article therefore begins from the premise that religion must be approached as an active force in contemporary diplomacy rather than as an anomaly left over from a premodern past.

Southeast Asia provides an especially important setting for this discussion because it is one of the world's most religiously diverse regions. The region brings together Muslim-majority, Buddhist-majority, Christian-majority, and religiously mixed societies, all of which have been shaped by long histories of colonialism, migration, missionary activity, and local adaptation (Raymond, 2025). Such diversity has produced not only cultural richness but also recurring tensions over belonging, public morality, and political authority.

Religion in Southeast Asia is woven into education, social organization, nationalism, and state legitimacy, which means that it cannot be separated neatly from broader questions of regional order. Religious plurality can support coexistence and dialogue, yet it can also sharpen competition over resources, recognition, and national identity (Regilme, 2018). This ambivalence makes the region highly relevant for studying how religion enters diplomacy through attraction, persuasion, and symbolic projection. A serious account of Southeast Asian foreign policy therefore requires attention to how states mobilize faith not only domestically but also in their regional and international self-presentation (Huan & Emmers, 2017).

The central problem addressed in this article lies in the growing use of religious narratives, symbols, and institutions as instruments of state diplomacy in a region where faith is socially powerful but politically contested. States are increasingly aware that religious identity can be converted into diplomatic value by projecting moral credibility, civilizational depth, or models of moderation to foreign audiences (Salayan & Masbukin, 2025). This process matters because religious soft power can shape perceptions of legitimacy, influence regional standing, and support foreign policy claims without relying on coercive force.

At the same time, its deployment is never politically neutral, since it draws on domestic religious landscapes that are often marked by unequal recognition, sectarian tensions, and majoritarian pressures. A diplomatic strategy that seeks attraction abroad may therefore deepen contradictions at home if it rests on selective inclusion or symbolic simplification (Ciorciari, 2008). The real-world relevance of this issue is visible in how governments frame peace, democracy, moderation, and interfaith harmony as part of their international image. What is at stake is not only foreign policy branding, but the wider relationship between religious legitimacy and regional stability in Southeast Asia.

A considerable amount is already known about soft power and the growing salience of religion in international affairs. Soft power has long been understood as the capacity to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion, and recent scholarship has extended this concept to religion as a source of symbolic and normative influence (Jayanti, 2024). Religious soft power draws on cultural memory, ethical appeal, educational networks, and the authority of recognized religious actors (Mubarok & Candra, 2020).

The article also emphasizes the importance of sacred capital, namely the accumulated religious resources that enable states or institutions to project legitimacy across borders. Such capital may derive from historical prestige, respected religious organizations, globally resonant doctrines, or the ability to present a religious tradition as compatible with modern governance. The literature further suggests that religion can unify and divide at the same time, which makes its political uses inherently ambivalent. What is

already established, then, is that religion can function as a strategic resource in diplomacy and that Southeast Asia offers multiple examples of such practice (Trang & Dat, 2025).

What remains less clear is how these processes should be theorized in ways that are attentive to Southeast Asia's specific historical and political realities. Existing scholarship often acknowledges religion's return to diplomacy, yet it does not always explain sufficiently how religious soft power operates in settings where religion is deeply entangled with ethnic identity, postcolonial state formation, and contested national narratives (Mughtar et al., 2025). There is also a tendency to generalize from broader soft power debates without adequately addressing the domestic contradictions that shape the credibility of external projection.

In the Southeast Asian case, the same religious language that supports diplomacy abroad may also authorize exclusion, polarization, or unequal citizenship at home. This creates an unresolved analytical tension between external attraction and internal legitimacy. The regional literature identifies Indonesia's promotion of moderate Islam and Malaysia's Islam Hadhari as important examples, but the broader conceptual implications of these strategies remain underdeveloped (Muttaqin et al., 2025; Nubowo, 2023). The unresolved question is therefore not merely whether religious soft power exists, but how its effectiveness is conditioned by domestic contestation, institutional capacity, and external reception.

The research gap becomes sharper when viewed through the lens of Constructivism. Constructivist scholarship offers the most promising ground for this inquiry because it treats identities, norms, and meanings as constitutive of state interests rather than as secondary embellishments to material power. That perspective is especially useful for examining religious diplomacy, since states do not simply use religion as a tool but also seek to define who they are through the religious narratives they project. Religious soft power sits precisely at this intersection between instrumentality and identity formation.

It involves the strategic deployment of faith-based symbols, but it also depends on whether audiences accept the projected identity as authentic and appropriate (Murphy, 2017). The article therefore treats religious diplomacy as a process of social construction shaped by recognition, credibility, and moral interpretation. This theoretical move is necessary because purely state-centric or materialist models cannot fully explain why some religious diplomatic projects resonate while others appear hollow, contested, or hypocritical.

Filling this gap is justified not only because religion matters in Southeast Asia, but because the region exposes the limits of applying Western-derived assumptions about secularism and state-religion separation too mechanically. Southeast Asian states operate through institutional arrangements in which religion is neither fully privatized nor uniformly established. Indonesia, for example, is neither conventionally secular nor formally theocratic, while Malaysia combines official Islamic primacy with a more complex constitutional balance.

These hybrid arrangements shape the diplomatic uses of religion in ways that differ from European or Middle Eastern trajectories. A region-sensitive framework is therefore needed to explain how states mobilize religion under conditions of pluralism, colonial legacy, and majoritarian pressure. Such a framework must also account for the ambivalence of religion as a diplomatic resource, since the same sacred capital that enhances attraction can also invite suspicion if domestic realities contradict the projected image (Jones & Jenne, 2021). The article addresses this need by placing religious soft power within a more contextually grounded account of Southeast Asian diplomacy and political legitimacy.

From this foundation, the article is organized around a set of interrelated questions. How does religious soft power operate as an instrument of state diplomacy in Southeast Asia, and what distinguishes it from more general forms of cultural soft power. Under what conditions do states successfully convert sacred capital, educational networks, and religious narratives into diplomatic influence (Chang & Jenne, 2020). Why do some projects of religious diplomacy appear persuasive internationally while remaining fragile, contested, or contradictory at home. How do Indonesia's promotion of moderate Islam and Malaysia's Islam Hadhari illuminate broader patterns of attraction, legitimacy, and strategic self-representation. What do these cases reveal about the relationship between domestic religious politics and external diplomatic credibility. These questions are urgent because religion remains central to regional politics, while diplomatic competition increasingly depends on symbolic legitimacy as much as on material capacity. The article contributes by reframing Southeast Asia as a site for theorizing religion in International Relations, not merely as a collection of cases to illustrate theories produced elsewhere.

2. Research Method

This article employs a qualitative comparative research design grounded in interpretive analysis to examine how religious soft power operates within state diplomacy in Southeast Asia. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the central object of inquiry consists of meanings, symbols, identity claims, diplomatic narratives, and moral legitimization processes that cannot be adequately reduced to numerical indicators (Given, 2008). The analytical framework is anchored primarily in Constructivism, while also incorporating soft power theory and the concept of sacred capital to explain how states mobilize religious resources for external influence and self-representation (Santiago-Delefosse et al., 2015).

Constructivism is especially suitable because it allows state interests and diplomatic behavior to be understood as socially constructed through norms, identities, and shared interpretations rather than as fixed material calculations alone. Within this framework, religious diplomacy is treated not merely as an instrument of policy but as a process through which states project desired images of moderation, civilizational legitimacy, and moral credibility. The comparative design works well for this research because Southeast Asian states operate through different historical arrangements of religion and statehood, making context essential to understanding variation in diplomatic practice. Such a design also makes it possible to examine how similar diplomatic claims acquire different meanings depending on domestic religious politics, institutional capacity, and regional reception (Surawy-Stepney et al., 2023). The qualitative strategy therefore provides the conceptual depth needed to analyze religious soft power as a layered interaction among discourse, legitimacy, and foreign policy practice.

The data consist of academic literature, policy documents, official speeches, diplomatic statements, government reports, organizational publications, and credible secondary materials related to religion, soft power, and state diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Data collection was conducted through purposive document selection, focusing on materials directly relevant to the diplomatic projection of religion, the use of moderate religious narratives, and the relationship between domestic religious politics and foreign policy representation in cases such as Indonesia and Malaysia. The units of analysis are discursive and institutional expressions of religious soft power, including state narratives, policy formulations, educational and religious diplomacy initiatives, and public representations of sacred capital in regional and international arenas (Chand, 2025).

A qualitative coding matrix served as the primary instrument for organizing the data according to key analytical dimensions, namely sacred capital, identity projection, moral legitimacy, diplomatic attraction, domestic–external coherence, and state–society linkage. These dimensions functioned as the main variables for tracing how religious resources are translated into diplomatic strategies and how those strategies are conditioned by internal political realities. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, comparison across multiple document types, transparent alignment between the research questions and coding categories, and consistent use of the same interpretive framework throughout the analysis.

Reliability was supported by maintaining an explicit audit trail of source selection and thematic classification, while validity was enhanced by using materials directly tied to the article’s regional focus and conceptual concerns (Negou et al., 2023). Because the study relies exclusively on publicly accessible documentary materials and does not involve direct engagement with human participants, formal informed consent was not required; nevertheless, ethical standards were maintained by avoiding selective misrepresentation, treating politically sensitive religious material with caution, and preserving confidentiality wherever non-public individual information could otherwise be inferred.

3. Result and Discussion

Religious soft power in Southeast Asia operates through the conversion of faith-based legitimacy into diplomatic attraction. State actors do not rely solely on economic performance, strategic alignment, or institutional prestige when projecting influence abroad. They also draw upon sacred narratives, religious institutions, and morally resonant vocabularies to shape how external audiences perceive national identity. In this setting, religion functions as a diplomatic asset when it is framed as a source of moderation, harmony, ethical leadership, or civilizational depth (Rahmadian et al., 2025). Such framing is especially important in Southeast Asia, where religious identity remains socially visible and politically meaningful across domestic and regional arenas. Diplomatic influence therefore emerges not only from material capacity, but also from the ability to present a credible moral image. Religious soft power becomes effective when states are able to translate internal religious resources into persuasive forms of external recognition.

A major pattern in the discussion concerns the use of religion as a language of attraction rather than coercion. Southeast Asian governments increasingly present faith traditions as evidence of national moderation, social tolerance, and responsible public ethics (Yoshimatsu, 2022). These diplomatic narratives seek to distinguish religious legitimacy from extremism and to position the state as a morally stable actor in regional and global affairs. Religion thus becomes part of foreign policy branding, especially when states attempt to build reputations as mediators, pluralist societies, or responsible representatives of Muslim-majority governance. Such projection is not merely rhetorical decoration. It shapes diplomatic reception by linking state identity to values that appear socially rooted rather than strategically improvised. The effectiveness of this process depends on whether religious imagery is received as credible, coherent, and politically meaningful by foreign audiences. Diplomatic attraction is therefore inseparable from the broader politics of recognition.

Sacred capital provides the underlying basis for this form of influence. It refers to the accumulated religious resources that enable states to project authority through respected institutions, educational networks, symbolic histories, and recognized moral traditions. Sacred capital strengthens diplomatic presence because it gives religious soft power a

sense of continuity and authenticity that cannot be manufactured quickly through ordinary public relations. Where such capital is embedded in long-standing national narratives or influential religious organizations, external messaging gains greater symbolic depth. This is one reason why religious diplomacy cannot be understood purely as communication strategy. It depends on the prior existence of institutions and moral reputations that audiences can recognize as socially grounded. Diplomatic success therefore rests not only on what states say about religion, but on the cultural and institutional foundations that make those claims believable. Sacred capital turns religion from a domestic identity resource into an instrument of regional and international visibility.

The comparative pattern becomes clearer when national variation is taken seriously. Indonesia and Malaysia illustrate two distinct yet related pathways through which religion enters diplomacy. Indonesia has often drawn on the language of moderate Islam, democratic pluralism, and interfaith coexistence in order to present itself as a model of Muslim-majority governance compatible with global norms. Malaysia, by contrast, has historically projected a more state-managed Islamic modernity, including the language of Islam Hadhari and other formulations that link religious development to institutional order and national progress (Sidik & Dilawati, 2025). These differences matter because they shape how diplomatic messages are formulated, which actors carry them, and how external audiences interpret them. Religious soft power is therefore not a uniform regional script. It is filtered through different state traditions, constitutional arrangements, and histories of managing religious authority. The result is a set of distinct diplomatic styles that nevertheless share a common reliance on morally charged projection.

Domestic legitimacy plays a decisive role in conditioning the effectiveness of external religious projection. A state may present itself internationally as tolerant, moderate, and ethically grounded, yet such claims lose persuasive force when domestic religious politics appear exclusionary, polarized, or administratively inconsistent. The gap between diplomatic image and internal practice becomes a major constraint on religious soft power. External attraction depends not only on persuasive messaging, but also on whether state behavior at home sustains the moral credibility of that messaging. This makes religious diplomacy structurally fragile. It can generate admiration when domestic arrangements broadly support the projected image, but it can also invite skepticism when symbolic claims obscure unresolved tensions around minority rights, sectarian inequality, or majoritarian pressure. Religious soft power is therefore shaped by a constant interaction between external ambition and internal legitimacy. Diplomatic projection succeeds most clearly when states manage to align moral narrative with institutional practice.

Another important pattern concerns the selective nature of audience reception. Religious diplomacy does not circulate in a neutral environment where messages are passively absorbed. External audiences interpret religious projection through their own political concerns, ideological expectations, and regional memories. A state's invocation of moderation may be welcomed by some actors as a constructive contribution to peaceful diplomacy, while others may read the same discourse as strategic image management. This variability means that religious soft power remains contingent rather than automatic. Its influence depends on how messages intersect with broader debates about pluralism, political Islam, civilizational legitimacy, and the credibility of state-led moral narratives. Diplomatic attraction is therefore not merely produced by the sender. It is co-constituted

through reception, recognition, and contestation across regional and international publics.

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Religious Soft Power and State Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

<i>Analytical Dimension</i>	<i>Main Pattern</i>	<i>Diplomatic Implication</i>
<i>Source of attraction</i>	Religion framed as moderation, harmony, or civilizational value	Enhances international image and symbolic legitimacy
<i>Sacred capital</i>	Religious institutions, scholars, and traditions support credibility	Strengthens moral authority in diplomacy
<i>Domestic-external coherence</i>	External projection depends on internal consistency	Gaps weaken diplomatic credibility
<i>Case variation</i>	Different national models shape distinct diplomatic strategies	Produces uneven but significant regional influence

Source: Processed by the researcher, 2026

Table 1 clarifies that religious soft power is produced through the interaction of symbolic framing, institutional credibility, and domestic coherence rather than through discourse alone. The source of attraction matters because religion becomes diplomatically effective only when presented in ways that resonate with broader expectations of stability, ethical order, or civilizational confidence. Sacred capital gives such projection depth by connecting state messaging to institutions and traditions that appear socially legitimate. Domestic-external coherence functions as the central test of credibility, since inconsistencies between foreign policy image and internal practice weaken persuasive force. Case variation further demonstrates that religious diplomacy cannot be generalized across Southeast Asia without attention to state-specific religious arrangements. The table therefore supports the broader argument that religious soft power is neither incidental nor purely rhetorical. It is a structured diplomatic practice shaped by the alignment of identity, institutions, and public legitimacy.

This interpretation is consistent with earlier scholarship on soft power while also extending it in important ways. Traditional soft power theory emphasized attraction through culture, values, and policy credibility, but often treated religion as a secondary or derivative element. More recent work on religion in International Relations has corrected that omission by showing that faith traditions can shape legitimacy, transnational identity, and normative authority. The Southeast Asian discussion adds a further layer by demonstrating that religion is not simply a cultural background to diplomacy. It is an active medium through which states articulate political personality and moral distinction. Constructivist scholarship is especially useful here because it explains why the diplomatic value of religion depends on recognition, social meaning, and the credibility of projected identity. Religious soft power therefore becomes intelligible not as symbolic excess, but as a constitutive part of how some states define and communicate who they are. The regional cases refine this literature by showing how religious diplomacy is embedded in postcolonial state formation and contested domestic pluralism.

The implications for International Relations theory are substantial. Materialist approaches remain limited in their capacity to explain why symbolic legitimacy and moral language can shape diplomatic influence in ways that exceed immediate strategic calculation. A purely secular reading of diplomacy is also inadequate in settings where religion remains deeply woven into public authority and collective identity. The Southeast Asian cases indicate that state influence is partly constructed through

narratives that align political purpose with civilizational and ethical meaning. Religion matters not because it displaces strategic behavior, but because it helps define the terms through which strategy becomes legitimate and attractive. This calls for a broader understanding of power in which symbolic and moral resources are treated as politically consequential rather than analytically residual. Religious soft power thus challenges the assumption that diplomacy can be understood apart from the normative identities through which states seek recognition. The theoretical significance lies in reintroducing faith-based legitimacy into the study of statecraft without reducing it to irrationality or cultural ornament.

These dynamics also carry direct relevance for regional politics. In Southeast Asia, where interfaith coexistence, majoritarian pressures, and democratic uncertainty often overlap, religious diplomacy can influence not only bilateral image but also broader regional positioning. States use religion to differentiate themselves, to claim moral authority, and to shape perceptions of leadership within ASEAN and beyond. Such positioning can support dialogue and symbolic cooperation, yet it may also intensify competition over which model of religious modernity appears most legitimate. Religious soft power therefore participates in regional ordering as well as foreign policy projection. It contributes to how states imagine themselves in relation to neighbors and to how they define acceptable forms of public religiosity on the international stage. The diplomatic use of religion is thus linked to wider contests over moderation, legitimacy, and normative leadership. Regional politics becomes partly structured by the circulation of these moral claims.

The discussion also reveals important strengths and limits in state reliance on religion as a diplomatic resource. One strength lies in the ability of religious soft power to generate attraction through culturally grounded symbols that appear more authentic than generic branding language. Another lies in its capacity to connect domestic identity with foreign policy narrative, thereby giving diplomacy a stronger sense of ideological coherence. Yet these strengths are offset by clear limitations. Religious diplomacy is vulnerable to contradiction when domestic governance fails to sustain pluralism or when projected ideals exceed institutional reality. Its effects are also uneven because audiences interpret religious signals differently and may distrust state-led moral narratives. An additional complexity is that religion can produce attraction and discomfort simultaneously, especially when the same symbolic repertoire is read as inclusive by some observers and exclusionary by others. Religious soft power therefore remains a powerful but unstable instrument of diplomatic practice.

Future inquiry would benefit from examining a wider range of Southeast Asian cases beyond the more frequently discussed examples of Indonesia and Malaysia. More detailed attention to Buddhist, Christian, and mixed religious diplomacies would enrich understanding of how sacred capital operates across different traditions and state formations. There is also a need for closer study of audience reception, since the impact of religious diplomacy depends heavily on how external actors interpret its moral claims. Digital diplomacy presents another important direction, especially as religious narratives increasingly circulate through transnational online platforms rather than only through formal state channels. Practical relevance is equally clear for diplomats and policymakers seeking to mobilize religion without deepening domestic contradiction or regional suspicion. The strategic challenge is not simply to deploy sacred symbols, but to sustain the institutional and ethical conditions that make them credible. Religious soft power in Southeast Asia therefore remains a key site for understanding how identity, legitimacy, and diplomacy interact in a plural regional order.

4. Conclusion

Religious soft power in Southeast Asia operates through the strategic conversion of sacred capital, moral legitimacy, and religious identity into diplomatic attraction. The discussion has emphasized that religion is not an ornamental addition to statecraft, but a meaningful source of symbolic influence through which states seek recognition, credibility, and regional standing. Diplomatic projection becomes effective when religious narratives of moderation, harmony, or civilizational value are supported by institutions and traditions that audiences regard as socially grounded. At the same time, the persuasive force of such projection depends heavily on domestic-external coherence, since claims advanced abroad are vulnerable when internal religious politics reveal exclusion, inconsistency, or unresolved tension.

The comparative attention to Indonesia and Malaysia has clarified that religious diplomacy takes different forms depending on state-religion arrangements, historical trajectories, and strategies of external image formation. Religious soft power therefore emerges as both a resource and a constraint, shaped by the interaction between state ambition, public legitimacy, and audience reception. In this sense, Southeast Asian diplomacy illustrates how power increasingly operates through moral credibility as well as through institutional and strategic capacity.

The article contributes to the field by advancing a regionally grounded account of how religion functions within contemporary diplomacy and by showing that soft power cannot be fully understood without attention to sacred capital, symbolic legitimacy, and domestic political context. Its theoretical value lies in extending constructivist debates on identity and recognition into the study of religious diplomacy, while also refining soft power scholarship through a closer focus on the institutional and moral conditions that make attraction possible. Rather than treating religion as a residual cultural variable or as an exceptional force outside normal diplomacy, the discussion places it at the center of how states construct persuasive images of themselves.

This perspective also broadens the study of Southeast Asia by demonstrating that the region is not merely an empirical site for testing imported theory, but a productive setting for rethinking the relationship between religion, state identity, and international influence. The conceptual linkage between sacred capital and diplomatic projection offers a more precise vocabulary for analyzing why some forms of religious diplomacy resonate while others remain fragile or contested. Such an approach strengthens International Relations by restoring the analytical significance of faith-based legitimacy in the study of power, recognition, and state strategy.

Future research should expand the comparative scope to include a wider range of Southeast Asian cases and a broader set of religious traditions, particularly Buddhist, Christian, and mixed religious diplomacies that remain less systematically explored. Greater attention to audience reception would also deepen understanding of how religious diplomatic narratives are interpreted, accepted, resisted, or reworked across different regional and international settings.

Further work on digital diplomacy is equally important, given the increasing role of online platforms in circulating state-sponsored religious imagery and shaping transnational moral perception. Comparative analysis of institutional actors such as ministries, educational networks, religious councils, and civil society intermediaries would also clarify how sacred capital is assembled and projected in practice. Another important direction concerns the tension between domestic pluralism and external image management, especially in cases where diplomatic narratives of moderation coexist with internal hierarchies of recognition. Advancing these lines of inquiry will improve both

scholarly analysis and policy relevance by clarifying how states can mobilize religion in diplomacy without undermining the credibility on which soft power depends.

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