

Editors' Introduction: Authority, Legitimacy, and Vulnerability in Contemporary Asia

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Contemporary Asia is often described through the languages of growth, crisis, digital transformation, and geopolitical competition. These languages are not wrong, but they do not fully capture another crucial transformation taking place across the region: the reworking of authority and legitimacy in everyday life. As Max Weber reminds us, domination is not sustained by coercion alone; it requires “a minimum of voluntary compliance” and, more fundamentally, “the belief in legitimacy” (Weber 1978, 212–13). In a contemporary institutional sense, legitimacy may be understood, following Mark C. Suchman, as the perception that actions are “desirable, proper, or appropriate” within a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman 1995, 574).

This issue of the *Journal of Asian Social Science Research* approaches contemporary Asia through precisely that problem. Who is trusted in a digital environment saturated with competing narratives? How does sacred memory become political capital? How do women negotiate dignity and agency within family and social expectations? Why do regional gender frameworks matter when domestic policies already exist? What happens when a welfare programme promises relief but delivers uncertainty? How can a diplomatic apology, or its absence, shape international perception and economic recovery?

These are not isolated questions. Taken together, they point to a shared concern with how authority is produced, contested, and repaired across contemporary Asian societies. The articles gathered in this issue show legitimacy being made and unmade in several arenas: in the mosque and on the feed, at the tomb and in the campaign, inside the household and across regional policy forums, at the distribution line and within local patronage systems, and in diplomatic performances where symbolic gestures can have material effects.

The timeliness of this concern is clear. Developing Asia remains economically dynamic, but its growth has become more exposed to trade uncertainty, geopolitical instability, and uneven domestic capacity. The Asian Development Bank's September 2025 outlook trimmed developing

Asia's growth forecasts to 4.8 percent in 2025 and 4.5 percent in 2026, reflecting a more difficult global trade environment (Asian Development Bank 2025). At the same time, the United Nations Development Programme's *Human Development Report 2025* argues that artificial intelligence and digital transformation should be understood not merely as technological change, but as matters of human choice, institutional imagination, and inclusive development (United Nations Development Programme 2025). These conditions make social science especially necessary because the most important transformations are not always visible in macroeconomic indicators. They are also visible in sermons, social media practices, family decisions, welfare queues, regional policy documents, and diplomatic gestures.

We open with Imtiaz Hussain's "Pakistani Mosque Imams' Perspectives on Youth Religious Extremism on Facebook and YouTube: A Diagnostic Survey." The article enters one of the most urgent debates in contemporary South Asia: the relationship between digital media, religious authority, and youth vulnerability. Based on a diagnostic survey of 411 mosque imams in Punjab and guided by Uses and Gratifications Theory, Hussain examines how imams perceive Facebook and YouTube as channels through which religious extremism may circulate among Pakistani youth, and how those perceptions vary by residence, education, and experience (Hussain 2025).

Hussain's contribution is important because he shifts the analysis away from abstract fears about technology and toward religious leaders as interpretive actors. The article avoids two common simplifications. It does not treat digital platforms as automatic producers of extremism, and it does not treat religious leaders merely as passive observers. Instead, it suggests that mosque imams may be important participants in digital literacy, community engagement, and counter-narrative work.

This article contributes to Asian studies by showing that digital transformation is always socially mediated. Online radicalization, where it occurs, is not only a platform problem. It is also a problem of trust, pedagogy, community guidance, and generational communication. In many Asian societies, religious authority remains central to public life, yet it now operates within a media ecology shaped by algorithms, short videos, viral sermons, and fragmented attention. Hussain's article therefore invites us to think about digital governance not only through regulation, but also through the local moral institutions that help people interpret what they encounter online.

From Pakistan's digital religious sphere, the issue moves to Indonesia's layered landscape of sacred memory through Yanwar Pribadi's "Religious and Political Narratives in Islamic Iconization: The Case of Kyai Kholil of Madura." This article examines iconization not as a fixed status granted by tradition, but as a living process sustained through pilgrimage, *pesantren* networks, devotional narratives, political memory, and communal recognition. Pribadi shows how Kyai Kholil became an iconic figure in Indonesian Islam in a setting where saintly veneration, *pesantren* authority, and electoral politics intersect (Pribadi 2025).

The article speaks directly to broader debates about charisma, religious authority, and political legitimacy in contemporary Indonesia. Weber's notion of charismatic authority remains useful here, but Pribadi's article complicates it by showing how charisma can be institutionalized through genealogy, place, ritual, and collective memory (Weber 1978). Kyai Kholil's authority is not only personal. It is reproduced through social networks and symbolic practices that connect Madura, *pesantren* culture, Nahdlatul Ulama circles, and broader Indonesian Muslim politics.

The contemporary relevance of this argument is significant. Indonesia's democratic politics cannot be understood only through parties, elections, or formal institutions. It must also be understood through moral vocabularies and symbolic affiliations that shape public credibility. Pribadi's article shows that the past is not merely background to politics. In many communities, it is one of politics' most renewable resources, capable of authorizing leadership, shaping belonging, and giving contemporary claims sacred or historical depth.

The next article brings the issue into the intimate sphere of gender, marriage, and social judgment. Md Abdul Jalil's "Marriage Dissolution through Divorced Women's Voices: New Insights from Bangladesh" centers divorced women's narratives and asks what marriage dissolution means to those who experience it directly. Using qualitative interviews with divorced women in Bangladesh, Jalil examines how women interpret the causes of marital breakdown and evaluate their decision to divorce (Jalil 2025).

Jalil's article shows that divorce is neither simply a tragedy nor a straightforward liberation. Women in the study describe education and employment as resources that may enable autonomy, but they also identify polygamy, extramarital affairs, in-law interference, technology-related tensions, and family pressures as factors contributing to marital breakdown. Particularly important is the coexistence of relief, regret, and self-blame in

the women's accounts. The article therefore does not flatten agency into empowerment slogans. It shows agency as something lived within moral expectations, emotional costs, and social consequences.

This contribution matters for understanding contemporary Asia because many of the region's most significant transformations occur inside the household. Debates about gender equality, education, employment, digital media, and family norms do not remain abstract policy issues. They enter marriages, kinship relations, everyday negotiations, and women's self-understanding. Jalil's article shows that divorce is not only a legal event. It is a social process through which women negotiate dignity, blame, freedom, and belonging.

Gender also appears in this issue at a regional and institutional scale. Ilham Dary Athallah, Hayara Khairia, and Tsabita Husna's "Indonesia's Strategic Rationale for Championing the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework" examines why Indonesia has promoted the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework despite already possessing a domestic legal architecture for gender equality. The authors argue that the apparent redundancy reflects a dual-track strategy in which regional norm-building is used to reinforce domestic governance while enhancing Indonesia's standing in ASEAN (Athallah, Khairia, and Husna 2025).

This article is especially timely because ASEAN has increasingly framed gender equality as part of its people-centred regional agenda. The ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework 2021–2025 presents gender mainstreaming as an organization-wide process involving policies, institutional practices, coordination, monitoring, and cultural change within ASEAN itself (ASEAN 2021). The *ASEAN Gender Outlook 2024*, produced by UN Women and the ASEAN Secretariat, further shows that progress on gender equality across the Sustainable Development Goals remains uneven and that gender data gaps continue to limit policy effectiveness (UN Women and ASEAN Secretariat 2024).

Against this background, Athallah, Khairia, and Husna's article helps readers see ASEAN not simply as a diplomatic forum, but as a site where norms are translated, negotiated, and strategically localized. Indonesia's support for the framework can be read as norm entrepreneurship, but also as a form of institutional scaffolding. Regional commitments may help strengthen domestic implementation by creating peer expectations, reputational incentives, and policy learning opportunities. This does not mean that ASEAN frameworks automatically produce equality. Rather, the article shows why formal architecture matters even when implementation remains uneven.

The question of implementation becomes central in Maruf Hasan Rumi and Md. Nure Alam's "Assessing the Open Market Sale (OMS) as an Urban Food Safety Net in Bangladesh: Policy and Practice Gaps." Their article examines the gap between policy intention and lived experience in Bangladesh's subsidized food-grain distribution system. Using interviews with beneficiaries and key informants, as well as documentary materials, the authors show how a programme designed for relief can be weakened by long queues, uncertain access, inadequate ration sizes, poor food quality, weak responsiveness to complaints, targeting errors, institutional capacity gaps, underfunding, corruption, and political influence in distribution (Rumi and Alam 2025).

The broader regional context makes this article especially important. Food insecurity and food price pressure have remained central concerns across many low- and middle-income countries. The World Bank's December 2025 food security update reports that domestic food price inflation remained higher than 5 percent in 45.0 percent of low-income countries and 43.5 percent of lower-middle-income countries with available data (World Bank 2025). In such a context, food safety nets are not merely technical programmes. They are moral and political tests of the state's capacity to protect vulnerable citizens.

Rumi and Alam's article contributes to Asian social science by giving transparency and accountability a lived form. It shows how beneficiaries encounter the state not as an abstraction, but through lines, ration cards, distribution points, local brokers, grain quality, and complaint systems. This is where Joel Migdal's insight about the state in society becomes useful. The state is not encountered only through formal institutions, laws, or policy announcements. It is also encountered through dispersed practices and everyday interactions in which citizens judge whether public authority is reliable, fair, and respectful (Migdal 2001). Rumi and Alam's article shows that the legitimacy of welfare policy is decided not only in design, but at the point of delivery.

The final article, Noel Yee Sinco's "Tourism as Osmosis: The Role of Apology Diplomacy in Shaping Tourist Arrivals in The Philippines," expands the issue from domestic institutions to international perception. Sinco examines how apology diplomacy affects foreign tourist arrivals to the Philippines from 2008 to 2025, using a descriptive interrupted time-series analysis and an "osmosis" framework. The article analyzes crises including the 2010 Hong Kong hostage crisis, the 2012 Scarborough Shoal standoff, the 2013 Taiwan fishermen shooting incident, the Canadian garbage crisis, and the Tubbataha Reef incident (Sinco 2025).

This article speaks to a region where tourism, diplomacy, reputation, and livelihood are deeply connected. State responses to crises matter not only for bilateral relations, but also for workers and businesses in transport, hospitality, food services, cultural industries, and local tourism economies. A delayed, insincere, or absent apology can therefore have consequences beyond symbolic politics.

Sinco's contribution lies in treating apology as a form of governance. In public life, apology is often viewed as moral language, but this article shows that it can also function as diplomatic technology and economic signalling. It may help repair trust after crisis, reassure international publics, and reopen channels of mobility. The article therefore connects soft power, crisis communication, and political economy in a way that is highly relevant to contemporary Asia, where reputation and mobility are increasingly tied to national development strategies.

Taken together, the articles in this issue demonstrate the strength of Asian social science when it refuses easy binaries. Religion appears here as both sanctuary and political resource. Social media appears as both everyday tool and amplifier of risk. Divorce appears as both rupture and recalibration. Gender mainstreaming appears as both normative aspiration and strategic practice. Food distribution appears as both relief and contestation. Apology appears as both moral gesture and instrument of diplomatic repair.

This issue also shows why methodological pluralism matters. Survey research, ethnographic inquiry, qualitative interviewing, document analysis, policy interpretation, and time-series analysis each illuminate different dimensions of social reality. No single method owns the truth of contemporary Asia. Each sharpens a different edge of it, and together they help us see how macro-level transformations are lived in everyday institutions, relationships, and judgments.

The broader contribution of this issue is to show that contemporary Asia is being shaped not only through elections, markets, laws, technologies, and regional agreements. It is also being shaped through the production of meaning: who gets believed, who is protected, who is blamed, who is remembered, who receives care, and who is expected to apologize. These questions are deeply social, but they are also political and economic. They determine how people experience institutions and whether they regard those institutions as legitimate.

We are grateful to the authors for the care visible in their scholarship and to the reviewers whose thoughtful labour strengthens the intellectual

quality of the journal. We hope this issue offers readers not only a set of empirical studies, but also a language for understanding Asia's present condition: a region where authority is plural, legitimacy is fragile, vulnerability is uneven, and social science remains indispensable.

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