

Post-Conflict Political Dynamics in Aceh and Bangsamoro: Religious Symbols and Patrimonialism in Practice

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Abstract

Post-conflict Aceh and Bangsamoro continue to face significant governance challenges marked by ineffective autonomy and the consolidation of religiously-grounded political authority. While special autonomy theoretically provides an inclusive framework for development, in practice, authority remains monopolized by elites who draw legitimacy from Islamic symbols. The rise of figures labeled as 'abang-abang syar'i' (male leaders who publicly represent Islam) demonstrates how public displays of piety are often intertwined with patronage, collusion and kinship-based power consolidation. In Aceh, widespread trust in religious scholars conceals an accommodative and hierarchical power structure, while in Bangsamoro, religious rhetoric is strategically deployed to distribute benefits narrowly within elite circles. The findings suggest that religious symbolism primarily operates as aesthetic legitimization, while entrenched corruption and patronage networks continue to undermine inclusive, accountable, and socially-just governance.

Keywords: Post-conflict Aceh, Bangsamoro, local governance, neopopulism, Muslim autonomy



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Introduction

A study of Muslim autonomy in Southeast Asia examines how the fusion of religious identity, geopolitics, and colonial legacies shapes the path to post-conflict peace. Both Aceh in Indonesia and Bangsamoro in the southern Philippines have historically faced intense resistance to and negotiations with central authorities. These two regions represent parallel struggles for self-determination, and although both have transitioned from decades of violent conflict to peace agreements Aceh with the Helsinki Agreement in 2005, and Bangsamoro with the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014. Their post-conflict trajectories vary significantly in terms of governance structures, implementation of autonomy, and integration into the national political framework.¹²

These cases not only illuminate center-periphery relations but also raise broader questions about how Muslim identity and local governance can operate within the dominant secular-nationalist framework in Southeast Asia. A comparative analysis of Aceh and Bangsamoro highlights institutional design, transnational Muslim solidarity, and local political culture as influential in the interests of sustaining peace. Furthermore, the archipelagic geography of Southeast Asia presents both challenges and opportunities for the development of autonomy in regional governance, maritime connectivity, and cross-border interactions based on Muslim communities.³⁴⁵

This article outlines the institutional differences between regions as identified by international organizations. However, as mentioned earlier, less attention has been paid to the regional similarities that emerge in post-conflict religious governance performance. Regional convergence in

¹ Aspinall 2009.

² Lara & Champain, 2009

³ Chalk 2017.

⁴ International Crisis Group 2023.

⁵ ASEAN-AIPR 2022.

the performance of post-conflict religious governance is less discussed. From existing literature, the intensity of autonomy is theorized as the central variable. However, the present study explains that the performance of Islamic moral authority, the neopatrimonial network, and elite piety are mechanisms of political legitimization that are present in both cases. As such, this article aims to reveal this positive under-studied convergence and contributing to the discussion of theorized subnational governance systems in relation to religion.

By placing Aceh and Bangsamoro in the broader context of Muslim autonomy movements in the region, this study argues that peacebuilding cannot be viewed solely as a domestic process, but also as an interaction between local agents, national policies, and transnational Islamic networks. This discussion bridges comparative politics with post-conflict studies and the politics of Islamic identity in Southeast Asia, which offer insights into how autonomy functions not only as a political concession but as a path to sustainable peace rooted in cultural and religious legitimacy.⁶⁷⁸

Literature Review

Post-Conflict Governance in Muslim-Majority Regions

After conflict, the governance of Muslim-majority communities tends to face a series of challenges, namely legitimacy, institutional vulnerability, and social reconstruction. The measurement of sustainable peace cannot rely solely on the cessation of bloody conflict. Efforts must be made to consolidate legitimate and accountable institutions that are capable of responding to and accommodating the demands of society.

⁶ Moner & Arugay 2024.

⁷ Sustikarini 2019.

⁸ International Crisis Group 2020.

Paris argues⁹ that in order to restore and maintain public information, political and security reforms cannot be separated.¹⁰

In this context, the role of religion is ambiguous. As a driving force, politics can use and exploit religion as a potential instrument that drives moral legitimacy. On the other hand, political elites only exploit religious teachings and open institutions to exert control and mobilize exclusive identities^{11 12}

As recognized in moral regulation and political manipulation, rulers can use and regulate religious discourse. Rulers can use religious discourse to regulate society. Aceh and Bangsamoro are examples of this. In the same historical context, both have shifted from prolonged separatist conflicts to formal autonomous government structures that accommodate religious and cultural identities. These arrangements appear to maintain informal networks of power, patronage, and religion.¹³ As a result, the peace agreements are marred by corruption, clientelism, and exclusion as larger fundamental problems remain operational, even though relative stability has been achieved.¹⁴

Patrimonial Islam

Patrimonialism refers to a system of government in which power is exercised through personal relationships and reciprocal exchanges within patron-client networks. In the case of most Muslim communities, this framework is useful for analyzing the function of informal power structures disguised as religious. Islam is patrimonial when political elites control Islamic symbols and discourse to justify their clientelistic networks, which,

⁹ Paris 2004.

¹⁰ Call and Cousens 2008.

¹¹ Kaldor 2012.

¹² Haynes 2011.

¹³ Buehler 2016.

¹⁴ Jatmika et al., 2022.

in many cases, serve elite power interests rather than ideological commitments. Instead of building institutions based on Islamic ethics, elites tend to invoke religious justification to rationalize nepotism, rent-seeking, and exclusionary loyalty structures.¹⁵

In post-conflict regions such as Aceh and Bangsamoro, Islamic patronage has emerged as a new form of hybrid political order, combining Islamic moral legalism with established patronage systems.¹⁶ In Aceh, the implementation of sharia-based autonomy is even more often led by political elites who manipulate Islam as a tactic to consolidate loyalty and suppress opposition while maintaining clientelistic practices.¹⁷ Meanwhile in Bangsamoro, the interaction between religious authority and kinship patronage systems has maintained oligarchic control despite formal commitments to accountability and inclusion.¹⁸

Such dynamics show that Islam-based legitimacy is not necessarily incompatible with patronage politics and can reinforce it. Religious symbols and patron-client relationships reinforce informal power and blur the distinction between moral governance and political manipulation. To address this, one must separate true religious values from transactional values, and redirect Islamic legitimacy toward the consolidation of democratic accountability and social justice.¹⁹

Moral Politics and Masculinity

In post-conflict Muslim-majority populations, political legitimacy is often conflated with moral and religious authority, which fosters a ‘masculine-idealistic’ form of governance. The rebuilding of the post-conflict political order tends to revive patriarchal orders, with moral

¹⁵ Buehler 2016

¹⁶ Ziegenhain 2025.

¹⁷ Hakim et al. 2024.

¹⁸ Acuna et al., 2025.

¹⁹ Platteau 2011.

leadership symbolically represented by elite men who position themselves as guardians of faith and moral order. The relationship between morality, religion, and masculine order can be described as 'religious masculinity', a cultural scenario in which male leadership claims authority through public displays of piety and moral steadfastness.^{20 21}

In Aceh and Bangsamoro, this pattern is reflected in figures informally referred to as 'abang-abang syar'i': male leaders who publicly represent Islam and, with respect and obedience, dominate the political arena and community. Their symbolic religious appearance is politically interpreted as justification for ruling with little or no resistance. However, this morally-assessed masculinity masks a deep contradiction between public virtue and private vice. Behind the rhetoric of purity and discipline, practices of corruption, nepotism, and exclusion continue unabated.^{22 23} The fusion of religious moral authority and masculine power forms a political culture that legitimizes coercive rule and the suppression of dissent under the guise of moral order.

This presentation of masculinity is achieved through male-dominated kinship and patronage networks, which not only support clientelistic exchanges but also marginalize women and underrepresented groups. In Aceh, the institutional implementation of sharia administration enforces patriarchal norms which, embedded in a post-conflict state, exacerbate unequal governance by limiting women's participation and reinforcing inequality in politics²⁴

In Bangsamoro, a similar peacebuilding process has reinforced the masculine identities of leaders around wartime governance, where moral and kinship authority continues to shape inclusion and exclusion in local government. The convergence of moral politics and masculinity functions

²⁰ Kuntz 2018

²¹ Nakayama et al, 2024

²² Berger 1963.

²³ Rezaian 2020.

²⁴ Human Right Watch, 2010

as a cultural and political mechanism for elite consolidation. Religious moral modalities become tools for performative and strategic moral accountability, justifying patriarchal domination while deflecting demands for accountability. As a result, the moral order of society reinforces, rather than changes, existing gender biases, thereby consolidating the alignment between masculinity, power, and religiosity.²⁵

Understanding the intersection of moral politics and masculinity is therefore crucial to understanding the persistence of informal power structures in post-conflict Muslim contexts. It illustrates how political legitimacy is reproduced not only through institutional mechanisms, but also through gendered moral appearances that standardize inequality and obscure corruption. This framework also offers an analytical bridge to explore how and why certain personal moralities, particularly practices such as polygamy, function as an extension of masculine political legitimacy, a theme that will be further elaborated in the next section.

Islamic Neopopulism

After the conflicts in Aceh and Bangsamoro, referred to as the period of reconciliation, Islamic neopopulism remained one of the forces that changed the face of electoral politics and social reconstruction. Unlike populism classifications based on the antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ outside of context, Islamic neopopulism cleverly blurs the boundaries of antagonism between the people and the elite with the help of Islam and establishes a moral consensus that is embodied in religious discourse in the public sphere. Neopopulism simultaneously rallies support from a broader population but remains built within a classified doctrinal framework and simultaneously constructs political legitimacy

²⁵ Torbati, 2024.

and moral authority.²⁶ Ironically, in many contexts, this moral authority becomes a political burden for those in power, encouraging them to consolidate their authority while ignoring interpretations and demands for pluralism.²⁷

In Aceh and Bangsamoro, the rhetoric of the elite is carefully constructed to portray executive authority as divine will, especially on issues of morality and social authenticity. This religious framework is acceptable to constituents because of its emotional and spiritual resonance, spreading through networks of local mosques and religious institutions. The framework transforms the moral narrative into a mechanism of control, gathering mass support while simultaneously narrowing the democratic and pluralistic space expected of a post-conflict government. For the opposition whether marginalized, reformist, or simply rebellious alignment with the idea of sovereign power is reinforced through the prism of orthodoxy, which implies that power itself is an indisputable moral truth.^{28 29 30}

Although the ‘Islam populism’ rhetoric of populism creates an illusion of coherence, the moralizing process is actually a divisive force. Islamic neopopulism constructs a moral dualism that divides the population into loyal people who are ‘right’ and in line with divine will, and ‘others’, who are social and religious disruptors. The moral binary of this dualism supports an ideological structure that legitimizes exclusion, reflecting a pattern seen in more developed neopopulist regimes such as Indonesia, where Islamic narratives are used to justify authoritarian consolidation under a moral governance framework^{31 32}

²⁶ Rakhmani and Hadiz 2022.

²⁷ Torre 2018.

²⁸ Yusof & Bagalong, 2023.

²⁹ Rahmania & Niko 2025.

³⁰ Helmiati 2014.

³¹ Sunardi 2019.

³² Rakhmani & Hadiz 2022.

Islamic neopopulism operates ambiguously, offering economic empowerment and social inclusion to marginalized Muslim communities on the one hand and providing bonds and inclusion on the other.³³ Meanwhile, the ruling elite is dominated by methodists, who have transformed minimized participatory institutions into arenas of control. Aceh is characterized by political centralization and conservative patronage, where anti-globalization messages are born out of Islamic arguments and morality. The penetration and multiplication of democratic participation has given rise to pluralism, structuring institutions with a spirit of orthodoxy. Penalizing hierarchy and control, power, and constrained politics, with rhetoric that is directional and suggestive, a jolt of preaching.^{34 35 36 37}

Islamic neopopulism in Aceh and Bangsamoro shows how religious morality is both a source of inclusion and exclusion, strengthening and disciplining the people yet limiting differences. The combination of Islam, elite consolidation, and populist political rhetoric underlines the weak moral political gradation in the governance of post-conflict Muslim communities. In this case, divine authority is claimed to be related to hierarchical defensiveness and the prohibition of transformative pluralism.

Polygamy and the ‘Male Curse’ in Post-Conflict Governance

There have been multiple studies on post-conflict governance, patrimonial politics, and the mobilization of Islamic legitimacy in Aceh and Bangsamoro, but personal moral practices, especially polygamy, and the social phenomenon informally known as the ‘male curse’ have been

³³ Hadiz 2018.

³⁴ Sunardi 2019.

³⁵ Oztas 2020.

³⁶ Espesor n.d.

³⁷ Bangsamoro Governors 2025.

largely neglected. The term ‘male curse’ refers to a recurring pattern in which male elites, either through polygamous marriages or personal scandals, consolidate patronage networks, develop masculine authority, and obstruct institutional reform. In other words, the personal practices of male elites can function strategically to maintain political dominance.^{38 39}⁴⁰

In Aceh, marginalized male political elites are willing to use their position and religious authority to promote the normalization and legitimization of polygamy within elite networks, equating this practice with patronage dominance. Meanwhile, loyalty and control of patronage networks for access function simultaneously to educate Islam and strengthen political jihad in restricting women's political contestation, democratic responsibility in a more democratic accountability system.⁴¹ Similarly in Bangsamoro, polygamous elites not only uphold cultural norms, but also strategically manage political alliances and strengthen post-conflict governance.^{42 43}

The interaction between polygamy, elite masculinity, and governance outcomes has not been fully researched. Existing studies have focused more on institutional reconstruction, peacebuilding, or patronage and rarely touch on gendered practices as political technologies.^{44 45 46 47} These practices, even without legal force, complement the use of legal interpretations and Islamic practices to build power. In Aceh and Bangsamoro, it is worth further examination of how the personal power of

³⁸ Barma 2016.

³⁹ Nakatani 2020.

⁴⁰ Nurmila 2015.

⁴¹ Hakim et al 2024.

⁴² Yusof & Bagalong 2023.

⁴³ Rahmania & Niko 2025.

⁴⁴ Anwar Sadat & Ipandang 2020.

⁴⁵ Hariyanto 2016.

⁴⁶ Boston et al. 2023.

⁴⁷ Toral 2023.

male elites intersects with power structures and builds the legitimacy of patronage, as well as the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The politics of the 'male curse' functions not only as a personal matter, but as an active gender-oriented political mechanism in post-conflict Muslim societies.

Theoretical Framework

Patrimonial Islam

The patrimonial Islam framework, conceptualized by Michael Buehler, offers a crucial analytical entry point into how religious legitimacy is embedded in the logic of patrimonial governance in post-conflict Muslim-majority regions. This theory adapts classical Weberian patrimonialism, which focuses on personal governance, loyalty networks, and informal patron-client relationships, to the socio-religious structures of Muslim communities where Islam is the primary source of moral and political legitimacy. Buehler's approach shows that Muslim institutions and leaders do not only function as moral authorities; they also multiply patronage and political loyalty under the guise of religion.⁴⁸

In the cases of Aceh and Bangsamoro, this framework shows how Islamic elites transform patronage into moral legitimacy by aligning loyalty with the religious devotion of the masses. Political authority has shifted from being perceived as a purely secular function to being a spiritual mandate justified by discourse on sharia and ideas of collective welfare.⁴⁹ In the case of Aceh, the implementation of local qanun (sharia-based regulations) and the symbolic role of ulama (Muslim scholars) in government, in addition to religious inspiration, are strategically designed

⁴⁸ Ziegenhain 2025.

⁴⁹ Permana 2021.

to strengthen elite networks and local party control.^{50 51} The same applies in Bangsamoro, where local elites and former rebel leaders use Islamic rhetoric to justify patronage governance while maintaining the moral facade of post-conflict reconstruction.^{52 53}

The strength of this postulate lies in its ability to distinguish the domains of religion, morality, and political economy within a single analytical framework and to describe how Islamic symbolic capital works to maintain loyalty and moral authority in a balanced manner. It explains the phenomenon of post-conflict Islamic ‘renewal’ movements that consolidate, rather than dismantle, clientelistic relationships.^{54 55 56} However, the main limitation of patrimonial Islam is its tendency to overemphasize the role of elites while downplaying grassroots resistance and reformist reinterpretations of Islam. Thus, its relevance to this study is significant; it explains the paradox of post-conflict Muslim governance in which Islamic legitimacy simultaneously functions as a cover for elite consolidation and as a conduit for moral reform.⁵⁷

The moral politics and masculinity framework provides an interpretive bridge connecting the symbolic, gendered, and emotional aspects of political authority in post-conflict Muslim societies. Referring to concept of ‘performative religious obedience’ and theory of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, this perspective explores the seamless integration of religious morality and gendered constructions of power that serve to validate male governance. Moral displays of public piety, such as rituals,

⁵⁰ Feener 2012.

⁵¹ Kumalasari 2021.

⁵² Adiong & Diampuan 2021.

⁵³ Söderberg et al. 2021.

⁵⁴ Hamayotsu 2015.

⁵⁵ Clark 2012.

⁵⁶ Inayah et al. 2025.

⁵⁷ Shadiqin & Srimulyani 2022.

clothing, and speeches, are manifestations of political control and moral superiority.^{58 59}

In Aceh and Bangsamoro, this pattern emerges through the emergence of male religious figures known as 'abang-abang syar'i' (literally: 'sharia brothers'). These abang figures portray themselves as loyal guardians of morality with their disciplined demeanor, Islamic dress, and rhetorical emphasis on moral purity, reinforcing their credibility as protectors of the community. These men act as 'guardians of morality', which legitimizes their authority while marginalizing alternative masculinities and the participation of women, as well as political space, both informally and formally.^{60 61} In this context, political authority stems from the strategic positioning of weak patriarchal religious morality and support for economic relations, thereby maintaining patriarchal control.

The strength of this theoretical lens lies in its ability to reveal how morality and masculinity mutually produce political legitimacy. This analysis extends beyond institutional governance to include cultural and performative aspects of authority that have been under-explored in studies of Muslim politics. However, in doing so, this framework may place too much weight on the symbolic theater and too little on the material or institutional theater that underpins gender inequality. This remains relevant in this study. This framework explains why post-conflict governance in Muslim-majority populations tends to revert to masculine political orders, where grace, protection, and control serve as instruments of power rather than reflections of virtue. This framework combines gender and moral politics analysis, thereby enriching the study of how

⁵⁸ Saba Mahmood's 2005

⁵⁹ Raewyn Connell's 2005.

⁶⁰ Duncanson 2009.

⁶¹ Hearn 2024.

patriarchy patterns post-conflict governance arrangements and legitimacy.^{62 63 64}

Islamic Neopopulism

The third framework, Islamic neopopulism, expands the discussion to examine the mobilization of religious symbols and moral discourse by elites in post-conflict societies. Neopopulism is a concept that differs from classical populism. Neopopulism no longer discusses and separates the people and the elite but shifts this dualism into a moral community built on collective belief and divine authority. Islamic neopopulism increasingly combines these political strategies with religious rhetoric, building a broad moral consensus aimed at securing the dominance of elites who eliminate pluralistic opposition.^{65 66}

In Aceh, Islamic neopopulism is exemplified by leaders who use moral rhetoric and images of revitalization in the context of post-conflict cleansing to justify authoritarian practices and clientelism.^{67 68} Similarly, in Bangsamoro, neopopulism is used in the discourse launched by the former leader of the pro-Islamic Bangsamoro rebel group, the Moro National Liberation Front, in their declaration of Islam and the movement for revenge, introducing sharia law, becoming a false witness, and delegitimizing communities and labeling them as “morally corrupted” and redefining them. The paradoxical reality is that neopopulism, despite

⁶² Mahmood 2005.

⁶³ Connell 2005.

⁶⁴ Duncanson 2009.

⁶⁵ Hafiz 2014.

⁶⁶ Torre 2018

⁶⁷ Adiong & Diampuan 2021

⁶⁸ Miswar 2025.

claiming to represent the minds of the people, actually strengthens and consolidates central power and suppresses differences.⁶⁹ ⁷⁰

The strength of this framework lies in its explanatory power regarding how elites manipulate religious identity and morality to produce consent and moral legitimacy in a society in transition. It captures the emotional and symbolic resonance of Islamic populism, which turns religious beliefs into political currency. However, it also has weaknesses in that it ignores the socio-economic structures that in many cases are constraints and in many ways also drivers of the mobilization of neopopulism. Nevertheless, Islamic neopopulism remains very relevant to the cases of Aceh and Bangsamoro, as it shows how the elite politicize Islamic narratives of justice, purity, and sovereignty to consolidate power, legitimize discriminatory policies, and shift the moral language of transformative post-conflict reconstruction into a tool of control.⁷¹ ⁷²

Methodology

This study aims to understand and explain the post-conflict political dynamics in Aceh and Bangsamoro using a comparative qualitative approach. This approach enables researchers to examine the similarities and differences in the context of social management and regulation in different and complex social structures, even though each region has different histories. This study explains the complex interrelationships between religious symbols, patronage politics, masculine social domination, and connective corruption politics.⁷³ The secondary data sources used include government documents, government audit reports,

⁶⁹ Khamis 2022.

⁷⁰ Arfan et al. 2024.

⁷¹ Rasul Bernardo 2017.

⁷² Gross 2017.

⁷³ Ziegenhain 2025.

academic works, and news reports in and national local print and electronic media, as well as institutional and discursive analyses.⁷⁴

The choice of Aceh and Bangsamoro is based on a most-different-systems logic. While their designs of autonomy, center periphery relations, and historical trajectories differ, both regions embed Islam as a fundamental aspect of post-conflict governance. By comparing these two institutionally different cases that converge in the use of religious legitimization, the research uncovers neglected moral-political configurations.

In this analysis, I employ thematic coding to identify patterns of religion being used as a justification for patronage networks and for the display of gendered power. While thematic analysis privileges flexibility, it also offers robust methods for clustering meaning in a text, which fits an interpretive approach to political discourse.⁷⁵ More specifically, this study focuses on the construction of political legitimizing masculinities, particularly in the discourse surrounding the abang-abang syar'i figures of the post-conflict elite.⁷⁶

The absence of interviews and limitations regarding secondary data control are acknowledged; some local dynamics may, as a result, have been overlooked. However, this study adheres to ethical guidelines regarding data use by maintaining integrity, transparency, and protection of data sources, in accordance with the standard ethical framework for qualitative research.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Jatmica et al 2022.

⁷⁵ Khan 2021.

⁷⁶ Connell 2005.

⁷⁷ Morrow et al 2014.

Results and Discussions

Despite the two regions' divergent institutional designs frequently emphasized in previous studies such as Eaton & Shair-Rosenfield,⁷⁸ this article finds that Aceh and Bangsamoro exhibit comparable patterns of Islamic neopatrimonialism. In both regions, elite authority is consolidated through public piety, moral governance claims, and religious-symbolic performances that legitimize patronage networks. These similarities indicate that religion functions as a shared post-conflict political technology across different autonomy regimes.

Historical Context: Aceh and Bangsamoro in Post-Conflict Transition

Following the cessation of conflict, Aceh and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) face challenges in reconstructing their governmental structures in areas with complex intersections of religion, ethnicity, and history. Both Aceh and Mindanao experienced prolonged and simultaneous armed conflicts, demanding autonomy and recognition of their Islamic identities in predominantly non-Muslim countries. The 2005 Helsinki Agreement was a turning point for Aceh, ending nearly three decades of conflict between the state and the Free Aceh Movement by providing special autonomy and the political integration of the province.^{79 80} Meanwhile in BARMM, the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), as the representative of Bangsamoro, ended with the institutionalization of an integrative power-sharing arrangement, resembling Islamic legitimacy, as well as the ethos of democratic circulation.^{81 82}

⁷⁸ Eaton & Shair-Rosenfield 2024.

⁷⁹ Aspinall 2009.

⁸⁰ Miller & Feener 2010.

⁸¹ Buendia 2015.

⁸² Iqbal 2020.

Despite these historic achievements, both post-conflict contexts discussed above are also marked by dysfunction in the adjustment of formal institutional reforms to systems of informal, patrimonial, and moral-political relations. In Aceh, where the consolidation of local elites, many of whom are former Free Aceh Movement commanders, has given rise to what scholars refer to as 'agreed authoritarianism', in which the rhetoric of Islamic authenticity serves as a justification for a patronage system that is accepted with authoritarianism.⁸³ ⁸⁴ Meanwhile, in the Bangsamoro region, MILF's transformation from rebellion to government has reproduced similar dynamics, in which religious authority, civil relations, and social movement ties monopolize resource control, the regulation of distance relations, and political positions.⁸⁵ ⁸⁶

These pathways show that peace agreements, while ending open conflict, do not always dismantle the deep logics of power that defined governance during conflict. Rather, they reconfigure these logics into new forms of hybrid authority, combining religious narratives, symbolism of masculinity, and neopopulist tendencies to maintain legitimacy. Both Aceh and Bangsamoro thus represent what can be called post-conflict Islamic politics, where ideas of liberation intersect with practices of domination and control.⁸⁷ ⁸⁸

The Emergence of Abang-Abang Syar'i: Public Piety as Political Performance

In post-conflict Aceh and Bangsamoro, religious symbols have been transformed into tools of political legitimacy through the performance of public piety. Local elites have emerged as abang-abang syar'i, who display

⁸³ Aspinall 2014.

⁸⁴ Feener 2013.

⁸⁵ Che Man 1990.

⁸⁶ Yusof & Bagalong 2023.

⁸⁷ Hadiz & Teik 2011.

⁸⁸ Sunardi 2019.

moral virtue and Islamic discipline through specific strategies to consolidate authority and social control. These figures capitalize on what Bourdieu calls 'social capital' and convert religious credibility into political authority, helping to transform faith into legitimacy that is closely related to post-conflict societies and moral chaos.^{89 90 91}

Abang-abang syar'i's spiritual performances can be seen in the recitation of the Qur'an and prayers in mosques, along with the visible and active enforcement of sharia law. These actions, far from being mere personal expressions of belief, represent deliberate performative acts of political conviction that erase the authority of the elite. As a result, the abang perform in the public sphere a reconsolidation of the 'moral order' of violent conflicts, cultivating an image of moral regeneration while signaling and reinforcing clientelism and patriarchy.^{92 93} In post-Islamism, religion is no longer seen as a revolutionary ideology, but as a pragmatic instrument of government in which spirituality functions within, rather than against, the state and its logic.⁹⁴

In Aceh, Islamic symbols are institutionalized through qanun (local regulations), police supervision of religion, and ceremonial expressions that bind the government to sharia-based morality. The authority of elite politicians derives from a combination of religious legitimacy and kinship-based loyalty, which is a patrimonial political order overlaid with Islamic virtue. The interdependence between faith and power illustrates what Eisenstadt describes as neopatrimonialism: the combination of traditional power and modern state institutions to maintain elite networks.⁹⁵ Public religiosity in this context promotes personal virtue and hierarchical

⁸⁹ Bourdieu 1991.

⁹⁰ Goffman 1959.

⁹¹ Gokcekus & Ekici 2021.

⁹² Usman 2017.

⁹³ Galsim 2021.

⁹⁴ Bayat 2013

⁹⁵ Eisenstadt 1973.

control in which loyalty to ‘pious leaders’ already determines institutional accountability, thus avoiding the possibility of accountability.^{96 97}

In the case of Bangsamoro, religious piety exhibits more theatrical and emotional qualities. Leaders, such as Ahod ‘Murad’ Ebrahim, embody dual roles as mujahid and moral guides, and use histrionic performances that combine revolutionary credentials and Islamic symbolism to secure legitimacy during fragmented post-conflict governance. Religious symbols, such as recitations of the Qur'an, prayers, and references to martyrs during political meetings and speeches, function as performative acts of unity and moral authority. Behind these symbols, however, lies a patrimonial logic familiar to the pre-autonomous context, such as appointments, money distribution, and clan loyalty, indicative of patrilineal pre-autonomy.^{98 99}

The phenomenon of abang-abang syar'i reveals how Islamic symbolism becomes a moral language and a means of social closure. Although the rhetoric of obedience calls for equality and divine justice, in practice, it maintains an exclusive regime rooted in masculine authority and kinship patronage. Thus, religious appearance acts as a form of political technology of legitimization that transforms moral discourse into a means of maintaining elite domination and limiting pluralistic participation.^{100 101}

The Male Curse: Polygamy, Scandal, and Patronage Networks

Polygamy persists in Aceh and Bangsamoro as a strong marker of elite masculine identity. Beyond being an approved religious practice,

⁹⁶ Feener 2013.

⁹⁷ Rasyad 2020.

⁹⁸ Espesor 2021.

⁹⁹ Söderberg et al. 2021

¹⁰⁰ Lewis & Sagnayeva 2020.

¹⁰¹ Connell 2005.

polygamy also functions as a carefully planned political strategy. In the post-conflict governance structure, men's multiple marriages facilitate the expansion of relational alliances crucial for maintaining the patronage and client systems. Political elite networks consolidate systems of loyalty and influence through extended kinship, transforming marriage into a mechanism for circulating state control, resource flows, and economic benefits.^{102 103 104 105}

The normalization of polygamy among the regions' elite has implications for gender relations and the ethics of governance. Polygamy not only reinforces patriarchal hierarchies, but also reduces women participation in political and civic life by channeling them into dependent kindship roles within elite patronage networks,^{106 107} thereby strengthening male dominance in the public and domestic spheres. Furthermore, the distribution of intimacy and power among multiple wives often reflects corrupt practices and unfair distribution of resources. The private becomes political: intimate relationships within the household are transformed into a microcosm of public patronage, where kinship ties and favoritism blur the lines of accountability.^{108 109}

Scandals related to relationships strengthen, rather than weaken, the authority of those in power by diverting public attention from structural governance failures to moral sensationalism.¹¹⁰ Although discussions surrounding such moral contradictions appear to be reaching their peak, public attention to the much deeper and more fundamental failures of government management structures seems to be increasing.

¹⁰² Rasyidah et al. 2016

¹⁰³ Sasakawa Peace Foundation 2024

¹⁰⁴ Scott 1972.

¹⁰⁵ Nagel & Baekgaard 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Affiat 2011.

¹⁰⁷ Schew 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Scott 1972.

¹⁰⁹ Landé 1973.

¹¹⁰ Qodir et al 2022

Sensationalism that is more morally oriented actually reinforces the transfer of control inherent in the power structure, rather than triggering a replacement of the existing structure.^{111 112}

In some places, this phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the 'male curse'. This term captures the tension between gender issues, morality, and political power in post-conflict societies. It also shows how patriarchal privilege and performative religiosity are intertwined in building exclusionary governments. Thus, responding to this scenario requires more than just institutional restructuring. It is much more a cultural and moral rooted in hegemonic masculinities and underpin political legitimacy in Aceh and Bangsamoro.¹¹³

Patrimonialism Behind the Veil of Islam

One characteristic of post-conflict governance in Aceh and Bangsamoro is the remnants of patronage networks that subjugate and integrate patrimonial norms in governance above institutional rules, as well as relational and kinship obligations. Despite formal reforms and the application of Islamic rhetoric that frames Islamic morality, the patronal system of governance remains firmly rooted. A client system that reproduces patronage relationships based on family loyalty over bureaucratic professionalism. Behind the Islamic facade of governance, moral patronage remains, a system in which loyalty and reciprocity, over visibility and results, control access to power, resources, and the freedom to exercise them.^{114 115 116}

¹¹¹ Purdey 2016.

¹¹² Nagel, Allen & Baekgaard 2023.

¹¹³ Syahabuddin n.d.

¹¹⁴ Sombilon 2023.

¹¹⁵ Harding 2024.

¹¹⁶ Eaton 2024.

Public funds, along with budgets allocated for reconstruction and reconciliation processes, can be misused and taken over by informal cabinets, non-formal power holders, and even non-state actors who have close ties to the elite. The use of the budget for reconstruction, development, and reconciliation does not encourage an inclusive process, but rather strengthens and solidifies the oligarchy in which political resources and power are expressed in family relationships and sectarian networks. This has led to increased disparities in decision-making by disinterested parties, causing increased disparities and synchronization of institutions in budget cuts, within formal structures as stated in.^{117 118 119}

The symbolic appeal to Islam as a moral compass is ambivalent. Publicly, it is indeed called upon to affirm ethical leadership and communal solidarity, but in many practices, this kind of narrative functions more as an instrument of legitimizing nepotism, patronage, and corruption. In this context, religious symbolism becomes a protective veil that covers hierarchical control over the absorption of the people's energy, which should be a catalyst for true moral change.^{120 121}

The instrumentalization of Islam, especially under patrimonial systems, distorts its ethical and social functions. Instead of promoting justice and accountability, religion is set aside in favor of political continuity and family loyalty. This erosion of moral authenticity undermines the legitimacy of institutions and public trust. Both are essential for the construction of sustainable peace in post-conflict societies. Addressing this issue requires dismantling kinship-based

¹¹⁷ Bangsamoro Government 2023.

¹¹⁸ Eaton & Shair-Rosenfield 2024.

¹¹⁹ Kovács 2023.

¹²⁰ Harding 2024.

¹²¹ Eaton & Shair-Rosenfield 2024.

patronage structures and embedding accountability in a system of governance that transcends sectarian or family loyalties.^{122 123}

Corruption as a Structural Ill in Post-Conflict Governance

In post-conflict societies, repositioning corruption requires treating it as a condition embedded in the structures of political and economic reconstruction, rather than as a separate deviation. Aceh's post-conflict experience illustrates how corruption has become entrenched as part of a governance arrangement designed to consolidate peace after a prolonged internal armed conflict. Centralized authority and conservative patronage networks institutionalize corruption, which erodes public trust and development. This deep-rooted corruption risks reproducing the very pathologies that reform initiatives seek to overcome.^{124 125} The erosion of peace and development, the criminalization of new institutions, and the loss of public trust stem from corruption embedded in peace reconstruction. These findings point to a significant risk facing post-conflict reform initiatives: failure to dismantle power structures that existed during the war can lead to the reproduction of the very pathologies that reforms are designed to cure.

Corruption tends to exacerbate already fragile social structures by increasing competition for scarce resources and perpetuating unfair access to public goods. Corruption functions as a 'social disease' by eroding communal trust and prioritizing individual enrichment over collective welfare. Corruption permeates political, religious, and civil society institutions, undermining bureaucratic decision-making and impeding access to essential services.¹²⁶ These systemic and structural

¹²² Kovács 2023.

¹²³ Sombilon 2023.

¹²⁴ Kovács 2024

¹²⁵ Heiduk 2006.

¹²⁶ Salahudin et al 2025

roots make corruption more than just a legal violation; it is a systemic malfunction that undermines democratization processes and hinders the consolidation of peace.¹²⁷

In response, the need and rationale for proactive strategic change involves going beyond purely punitive measures. Reforms must focus on strengthening institutional and civil channels of action to combat the remnants of family-based patronage intertwined with corruption.¹²⁸ Only with sustained and transformative efforts can post-conflict societies, such as Aceh and Bangsamoro, hope to build legitimate governance structures that can enforce lasting and equitable peace and development.^{129 130}

In Aceh, the misuse of Special Autonomy Funds has become a recurring symbol of the convergence of moral legitimacy and systemic copyright infringement. Audit reports and investigative journalism have documented the diversion of much of these funds, intended for rural development and peace consolidation, to fictitious projects and control by politically connected contractors and family networks.^{131 132} While Islamic government rhetoric emphasizes moral integrity, these practices proliferate oligarchic governance and deepen public disillusionment with the autonomy arrangement.¹³³

A similar pattern can be observed in BARMM where the misuse of funds for barangay-level development remains rampant. Local officials associated with dominant clans or groups of former combatants have diverted funds intended for personal enrichment or client-patronage to strengthen their control over targeted communities. Reports by the Bangsamoro government across multiple years, as well as by independent

¹²⁷ Abuza 2022.

¹²⁸ Eaton & Shair-Rosenfield 2024.

¹²⁹ Thaib & Che Pa 2012.

¹³⁰ Bangsamoro Parliament 2023.

¹³¹ Sustikarini 2019.

¹³² Thaib & Che Pa 2012.

¹³³ Eaton, Kent & Shair-Rosenfield 2024.

watchdog agencies, detail the predatory corruption and inefficiency described above, as well as the erosion of institutional capacity and client structures that extend the provision of unfair services. Here, the invocation of Islamic moral authority acts as a shield of accountability as materially harmful corrupt practices are disguised under a veil of religious legitimacy.^{134 135}

Corruption in Aceh and Bangsamoro is not a residual ‘defect’ that remains, but a structural legacy of the power configurations that prevailed during the war. This catastrophe, wrapped in moral rhetoric, is caused by corrupt forces that are inseparable from religious, family, and financial relationships. As long as this network of corruption is not dismantled, it will always be the biggest obstacle to achieving inclusive and accountable governance in post-conflict Muslim regions.^{136 137}

Islamic Neopopulism and Exclusive Governance

Islamic neopopulism has been a significant feature of the post-conflict political transition in Aceh and BARMM, where religious discourse has become a tool of empowerment and a mechanism of exclusion. Here, Islamic neopopulism means the selective control by political elites of certain religious levels and symbols as a means to secure populist legitimacy from the community and consolidate patronage-based governance.¹³⁸ The integration of Islamic moral discourse with populist rhetoric, which portrays leaders as defenders of faith and protectors of the people, often silences dissenting voices and reduces political space. The deepening of exclusive governance structures is partly a function of the

¹³⁴ Bertrand 2020.

¹³⁵ Bangsamoro Information Office 2017.

¹³⁶ Bertrand, 2020

¹³⁷ Bangsamoro Parliament 2022

¹³⁸ Kunz, Myrttinen & Udasmoro 2018.

development of social and political control frameworks, which transform dissent into moral deviance or betrayal of religious solidarity.¹³⁹

In Aceh, the political response of former rebel elites, such as Zaini Abdullah and Muzakir Manaf, reflects a synthesis between Islamic legitimacy and neopatrimonial governance. Their moral authority and public religiosity are built on leadership activities such as congregational prayers, the socialization of qanun, and attendance at religious gatherings. However, this piety often clashes with practices of clientelism and nepotism, especially in the management of special autonomy funds, which are reportedly allocated and distributed through practices of control and political kinship circles.¹⁴⁰ ¹⁴¹ Under Irwandi Yusuf's administration, criticism of moralistic governance and systemic corruption became even more acute when Yusuf's reformist Islamic image was confronted with allegations of bribery in the procurement of goods. He demonstrated corrupt governance practices and how Islamic legitimacy can still coexist with clientelistic governance.¹⁴²

In BARMM, two former MILF commanders, Ahod 'Murad' Ebrahim and Abdulraof Macacua, have also occupied positions that intersect religious power and neopopulist leadership. They rely on theological authority and revolutionary credentials to project moral integrity and historical authority. Although the Bangsamoro Transition Authority has achieved some milestones in peacebuilding, it continues to be attacked for its factionalism, limited inclusivity, and marginalization of actors outside the MILF, including women, clerics outside the MILF structure, and non-Muslim minorities¹⁴³

The dominance of neopopulism in Bangsamoro is in the maintenance of unity, demonstrated through religion, in reducing the spectrum of

¹³⁹ Eaton & Shair-Rosenfield 2024.

¹⁴⁰ Furqan 2020.

¹⁴¹ Sahruddin et al 2024.

¹⁴² The Jakarta Post 2019.

¹⁴³ Kovács 2024

political representation and participation, with a similar pattern in Aceh. The gender dimension in neopopulist government is clearly manifested. In Aceh, where polygamy is not merely a cultural or religious issue, it is instrumentalized by politicians to expand their wealth networks. Yusuf and Manaf both utilize polygamy to strengthen family networks that underlie the articulation of power and the distribution of political dominance based on consensus, where its circulation is essentially responsible.¹⁴⁴¹⁴⁵ The instrumentalization of religion and gender has sparked moral accusations from women and women's associations, as the politicization of compressed Islamic religious values has a moral function in post-conflict governance.¹⁴⁶ In Bangsamoro, because polygamy is not inherited within a system, the monopoly of oligarchic dynasties and war patronage maintains a portion of the exclusion and predation of rentiers described in.¹⁴⁷

Overall, the experiences of Aceh and Bangsamoro (Table 1) illustrate how Islamic neopopulism, supported by patrimonial networks and masculine authority, produces a fragile politico-religious synthesis. Religious discourse functions as a framework of legitimacy for moral governance and a shield for the elite corpus to obscure corruption and defuse dissent. Thus, an exclusivist governance that prioritizes loyalty over merit and symbolism over substance has obstructed the promise of post-conflict democratization.¹⁴⁸

Addressing these contradictions requires a transformation of political ethics and institutional design. To build inclusive and accountable governance, it is essential to manage autonomy funds transparently, include pluralistic women and minority voices, and depersonalize leadership. Without these reforms, Islamic moral capital risks being

¹⁴⁴ Chew 2019

¹⁴⁵ Dialeksis, 2024; Detikcom 2025

¹⁴⁶ Sofyan 2025.

¹⁴⁷ Cabrera, 2025.

¹⁴⁸ Sasakawa Peace Foundation 2023.

instrumentalized into a populist currency that supports authority but undermines the proclaimed justice and equality.¹⁴⁹ ¹⁵⁰

Table 1. Comparison of Post-Conflict Political Dynamics in Aceh and Bangsamoro: Religious Symbolism, Patronage and Political Masculinity

Aspect	Aceh	Bangsamoro
Religious Symbolism	Islamic symbolism, particularly sharia-based autonomy, is instrumentalized to consolidate elite loyalty and reinforce political legitimacy.	Religious authority is intertwined with family-based patronage, functioning as a key source of political legitimacy.
Patronage Practices	Dense patron-client networks dominate the distribution of economic and political resources, with nepotism deeply entrenched.	An oligarchic order persists, sustained by interlocking family ties and religion-based patronage systems.
Corruption and Political Practices	Corruption and nepotistic politics thrive under the façade of religious legitimacy, obstructing transparency and accountability.	Despite the peace process, corruption and oligarchic practices remain widespread, undermining accountability and inclusive governance.

¹⁴⁹ Eaton & Shair-Rosenfield 2024.

¹⁵⁰ Kunz & Udasmor 2018.

Role of Political Masculinity	The prominence of abang-abang syar'i projects religious masculinity as both a moral authority and a basis of political dominance.	Religious masculinity similarly underpins elite legitimacy and loyalty, shaping the hierarchical order of political authority.
Implications for Post-Conflict Governance	Religious symbolism legitimizes patriarchal exclusivity, narrowing political inclusiveness and restricting citizen oversight.	Religion is mobilized to entrench oligarchic and exclusionary power structures, weakening democratic consolidation.
Recommendations for Reform	Prioritize institutional reforms that strengthen transparency, accountability and inclusivity as pillars for sustainable peace and equitable development.	Advance governance reforms centered on political openness, broader participation and robust accountability mechanisms to counter elite capture.

Conclusion

Despite the cessation of conflict and the implementation of special autonomy, Aceh and Bangsamoro continue to face challenges in managing special autonomy. In this case, the dominance of elites and patronage politics wrapped in religious symbolism is evident in the special autonomy arrangements. Autonomy, which should promote inclusiveness, has instead strengthened family and loyalty-based power networks. The use of religious symbols – in this case, the phenomenon of abang-abang

syar'i – serves to provide moral and aesthetic legitimacy to cover up existing inequalities and prevailing patronage practices.

This analysis describes the influence of moral politics and the performativity of masculinity in the post-conflict contexts of Aceh and Bangsamoro. Before gaining legitimacy, male elites who portray a pious public presence first consolidate and maintain hegemonic, hierarchical, and exclusive power. Vulnerable practices that are often labeled as the 'male curse' in the context of polygamy and personal scandals are not only moral issues, but also, consciously and unconsciously, strategically serve to develop patronage networks and strengthen elite domination. Thus, understanding post-conflict politics in both regions cannot be separated from considering gender aspects and morality in the private sphere.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of Islamic neopopulism in both contexts confirms that religious symbols not only serve to create community solidarity, but also for political control and exclusion. Control of the opposition and absorption of pluralistic participation, as well as the strengthening of patron-client relationships in government, are carried out through the centralization of power wrapped in religious rhetoric. However, there is a paradox: on one hand, religion is used to strengthen oligarchy and exclude groups outside the network, while on the other hand, the oligarchy uses religion to provide moral legitimacy for its rule.

Corruption and misuse of public funds in both regions indicate that informal and structural problems still function as major obstacles to accountable and inclusive government. Closed patronage accompanied by religious symbolism creates a form of governance that appears morally legitimate but is institutionally fragile. This points to the enormous challenge of reform, not only in formal terms but also and above all in terms of the social, cultural, and gender networks that underpin inequality.

The findings of this study show that post-conflict peacebuilding in Aceh and Bangsamoro is more complex than simply stopping violence and establishing formal institutions. In this context, the 'state of peace' is

determined more by the symbolic interaction of religion and the complexity and substance of political patronage, 'mass and private' morality, and the 'performance' of masculine domination. A deep narrative and understanding of these complex interactions form the basis for developing inclusive, accountable, and transparent governance instruments in building peace that is touched by more than just moral rhetoric and symbolic tropes.

This research supports the findings of past studies by showing that Aceh and Bangsamoro, regardless of their institutions, are on a convergent path of post-conflict Islamic political authority. In this comparison, we see how religious symbols, morally governed, and practiced neopatrimonialism as governance logics of varying consolidation of power in the political elite of the region. Religious governance and the neopatrimonial logics are what help the article challenge the notion that sees both cases mainly as concerning contradictions in autonomy and offers a unified moral-political scheme that might help in understanding the governance of subnational units with religio-political cloak.

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