

Research Article

Affective Pragmatism: Political Memory, and Indonesia's Selective Humanitarianism in Refugee Governance

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Submission: 25-04-2026 | Accepted: 14-07-2026

Abstract

This article explores Indonesia's ambivalent approach to refugee governance through the concept of "Affective Pragmatism." This concept addresses the tension, which is not accidental but structural, between emotion-driven humanitarian commitments and fear-based concerns regarding border security. While the 1951 Refugee Convention calls for universal protection, Indonesia promotes humanitarian diplomacy, at the regional level through the Bali process, while maintaining tight control over domestic asylum policies. Drawing on constructivist and postcolonial theory, this article seeks to demonstrate how political memory, particularly the legacy of the 1955 Bandung Conference, has shaped Indonesia's affective response to various humanitarian crises. In this article, the Rohingya are incorporated into a shared narrative of empathy and postcolonial trauma, while other illegal migrants face indifference and rejection. By linking affective pragmatism to debates on the contestation of norms and the politics of exclusion, this article offers a framework for understanding how emotions and memory create an uneven landscape of protection and contribute to the evolving debate on refugee governance in Global South countries, including Indonesia.

Keywords: Affective Pragmatism, Selective Humanitarianism, Refugee Governance, Political Memory, Norm Contestation.

INTRODUCTION

The increasingly fragmented international order has led to a rise in disputes among nations. Ultimately, these disputes have triggered a domino effect, with some of the resulting issues concerning refugee protection, a major battleground involving global norms, national sovereignty, regional identities, and conflicting political narratives. The post-World War II international refugee regime, enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, upholds liberal ideals concerning human rights, humanitarianism, and the internationally binding obligation to provide cross-border protection as a humanitarian duty (UNHCR, 2025). Yet these norms have never been free from challenge, particularly in certain parts of the Global South, where differing histories, political cultures, and identities have given rise to a variety of views on what should constitute responsibility toward refugees (Janmyr, 2019). A growing body of scholarship has begun to point out something that IR has long underplayed: that emotions, memory, and exclusion are not peripheral to world

politics but deeply constitutive of it (Crawford, 2000; Hutchison & Bleiker, 2008, 2014; Pace & Bilgic, 2019). Yet even within this growing literature, the affective dimensions of refugee governance outside the West remain surprisingly thin (Chimni, 2000; Betts & Collier, 2017).

Southeast Asia is an obvious place to look at these tensions. While many agree that Southeast Asia, through ASEAN, has developed numerous, even multilayered, normative dimensions concerning regional security and cooperation, this institutional growth has ironically formalized a structural empathy crisis towards humanitarian issues. ASEAN has never managed to build a coherent or legally binding refugee protection system, despite going through multiple massive displacement crises, from the Indochinese flows of the 1970s and 1980s all the way through to the Rohingya situation in the 2010s (Petcharamesree & Capaldi, 2023). What exists instead is a patchwork: ad hoc, state-centred, and firmly rooted in the non-interference principle (Hasan et al., 2025). None of the three key non-signatory states in the region, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, has developed rights-based asylum frameworks. They treat refugee movement as a discretionary exception to immigration law, which Kneebone et al. (2024) argue reflects a deliberate political choice, not merely institutional gaps.

The absence of protective mechanisms is no longer viewed as mere negligence but rather as a structural problem that causes issues to recur driven by competing national sovereignty interests (Dewansyah & Handayani, 2018). Within this multilayered yet emotionally restrictive landscape, Indonesia's paradoxical role, promoting humanitarian diplomacy abroad while enforcing strict deterrence at home, exemplifies how states strategically navigate these normative pressures not as an institutional failure, but as a calculated decision to contain both the refugee and the state's own moral obligations. This dynamic closely echoes Poole's (2019) argument regarding regional state behaviour under external pressure; such responses are often not intended to yield substantive policy changes, but rather function as performative strategies designed to secure political legitimacy from extra-regional normative agencies. In the context of refugee governance, Indonesia's affective commitment serves as this legitimizing tool, allowing the state to project the image of a 'responsible global citizen' internationally while foreclosing formal legal integration domestically.

This performative search for external legitimacy is clearly visible in Indonesia's diplomatic posturing. On the one hand, it has leveraged its image in diplomacy as a humanitarian leader by co-authoring the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (The Bali Process 2024) and by temporarily hosting Rohingya refugees while regional solutions were sought. In contrast, and in line with the lack of substantive policy change, Indonesia is not party to the main international legal framework and has not ratified the Refugee Convention or Protocol; further, it does not have a domestic comprehensive national asylum framework (Jani et al., 2024). This duality reflects what has been described as a gap between affective solidarity and institutional constraint in Indonesia's external engagements. Indonesia's actions reflect what Prabandari, Ketaren, et al.

(2025a) describe as a structural tension between affective solidarity and institutional constraints that has shaped Indonesia's engagement in external crises. Its domestic refugee policy is mainly one of deterrence: refugees and asylum seekers exist in years-long limbo without any hope of social integration or access to formal employment, depending on international organizations and local civil society institutions for survival (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2024).

Missbach (2015) refers to this as “partial protection,” in which the existence of refugees is tolerated but not officially recognized. While refugees are provided with housing, they are not fully integrated into society. Humanitarian organizations acknowledge their presence and provide assistance, yet they remain unrecognized by state legal authorities. McNevin and Missbach (2018) further describe what these refugees experience as “luxury limbo,” a form of prolonged detention legitimized through humanitarian rhetoric yet simultaneously serving as a border control mechanism.

This paradox is not specific to Indonesia; in fact, it is a regional phenomenon in which rhetoric about humanity conflicts with national interests and sovereignty. In these countries, the top priority is sovereignty, followed by immigration control and the maintenance of political stability (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026). What the Rohingya people experienced in 2015 marked a turning point, as the situation could no longer be ignored in the name of humanity; ultimately, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand granted temporary permission for the refugees stranded on the boats to disembark. Nevertheless, none of these countries was willing to take responsibility for the long-term protection or resettlement of these individuals. ASEAN, as a regional organization, also has shown no willingness to intervene in the crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine State, as evidenced by its hesitancy to address the underlying causes of the Rohingya conflict (Gunawan, 2024).

The fragmentation of ASEAN and Indonesia's ambiguous stance are also believed to be not merely institutional failures or a lack of capacity, but rather a reflection of deep-seated political decisions regarding the refugee issue. This perspective is largely influenced by historical memories of colonialism and decolonization, Southeast Asian pluralism, and ASEAN's principle of non-intervention, which restricts the measures that can be taken on domestic issues (Gunawan, 2024), as well as by effort to combat migration and displacement. This regional logic mirrors patterns documented across the Global South, where states similarly deploy selective humanitarian engagement as a mode of sovereign self-presentation while structurally foreclosing protection (Janmyr, 2019; Betts & Collier, 2017). Similar patterns of selective engagement and emotional differentiation have also been observed in Indonesia's broader foreign policy behaviour (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026).

Mainstream IR, dominated by rational-institutional and empiricist-positivist approaches, has historically treated the emotional and affective dimensions of world politics as subjective, irrational, and methodologically inconvenient. But that has started to change. Over the past two decades or so, scholarship on emotion, affect, and political memory has grown substantially, and this literature is making a

compelling case that emotions are not noise in the system; they are constitutive of collective identities and global power relations (Ahmed, 2004; Berenskoetter, 2014; Hutchison, 2016). This work speaks to calls for sustained engagement with non-Western emotional repertoires in IR (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014; Koschut et al., 2017) and connects to a broader literature on norm contestation in the Global South (Acharya, 2004; Auethavornpipat, 2025). Emotions bind political actors to particular memories. They draw lines between “us” and “them.” They determine what counts as morally significant. At the same time, the emotional experiences of communities shaped by colonial violence, such as grief, anger, trauma, and existential anxiety, have largely been excluded from mainstream IR discourse and from international policymaking. This matters because the ways memory is processed, what is remembered, and what gets silenced produce real hierarchies: some historical wounds are recognised, legitimised, and elevated; others are depoliticised or simply ignored (Olick, 2013; Subotić, 2019). Out of this selective remembering come what this article calls moral hierarchies, the largely tacit rankings that determine whose suffering gets noticed, who counts as a real victim, and whose historical pain is judged worth taking seriously (Pace & Bilgic, 2019).

There have been a number of studies that comprehensively examine refugee governance in Southeast Asia, documenting the legal and institutional aspects of the region's lack of protection, including obstacles to the ratification of the Convention (Dewansyah & Handayani, 2018; Kneebone et al., 2024), the prolonged conditions of change and uncertainty that refugees must contend with (McNevin & Missbach, 2018; Missbach, 2015), and the tension that lies at the heart of ASEAN's non-intervention norms and any humanitarian obligations that may arise (McMillan & Petcharamesree, 2021). On the other hand, IR studies have shown that emotions play a significant role in shaping collective identity, the formation of norms, and foreign policy behavior (Ahmed, 2004; Hutchison, 2016; Koschut et al., 2017). Building upon but departing from early rational-constructivist models of norm lifecycles (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), and recent studies have begun to link emotions with the dynamics of resistance to norms (Auethavornpipat, 2025).

Yet these two bodies of literature have developed largely in parallel. Studies of Southeast Asian refugee governance explain state behavior through institutional and geopolitical lenses, with limited attention to the emotional logics that animate policy choices and produce differential treatment of refugee populations. Conversely, IR scholarship on emotions has rarely been applied to the governance of forced displacement in non-signatory states of the Global South (Chimni, 2000; Collier & Betts, 2017). Existing frameworks can describe what Indonesia does, promoting humanitarian diplomacy abroad while enforcing deterrence at home, but cannot adequately explain why this selective pattern persists or how it is internally coherent from the perspective of the actors who produce it. This article addresses that gap by developing affective pragmatism as a concept that brings emotional and mnemonic analysis to bear on Southeast Asian refugee governance.

While these global iterations of the empathy gap and mnemonic mobilization are well-documented, a significant puzzle remains under-explored when these

dynamics intersect with national refugee governance in non-signatory states of the Global South. Specifically, the literature has yet to adequately address how a state can simultaneously deploy memory-driven humanitarian solidarity externally while structurally maintaining a fear-based regime of exclusion domestically. The core research problem of this study, therefore, lies in this systemic ambivalence: how do competing emotional registers and historical traumas shape a selective hierarchy of care that determines which displaced populations are granted provisional empathy and which are relegated to administrative invisibility?

Grounded in the specific case of Indonesia's response to forced migration, this article addresses this problem by asking: How does the interaction between postcolonial memory and the securitization of borders produce the logic of 'affective pragmatism,' and in what ways does this mechanism institutionalize selective humanitarianism within the state's refugee governance? By investigating this question across macro (diplomatic), meso (institutional), and micro (subnational/local) levels, this paper explores how emotions and political memory structure the logics of acknowledgement and marginalization, thereby challenging the epistemic boundaries of mainstream, rationalist International Relations.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative, interpretivist approach to examine the dynamics of emotions and political memory in the context of refugee governance in Indonesia. This approach is important in clarifying the politics of emotions and memory as strategic political practices within contemporary international relations. Instead of formulating a global causal logic, this study attempts to offer analytical and conceptual clarification of the concerns and political rationalities that in turn, shape the governance practices, however fragmented they may be, in ASEAN (Ahmed, 2004; Hutchison, 2016; Koschut et al., 2017). An interpretive approach is ideal for this study, as emotions and memories are not merely static data; both are socially and historically constructed meanings that must be interpreted through the discourse and practices of state actors.

The Affective Turn in International Relations

The "affective turn" in International Relations (IR) is adopted not solely as a theoretical approach, but as a methodological approach: it draws attention to the discourses and performances through which emotions are produced, circulated, and institutionalized. Instead of treating emotional language in policy documents as rhetorical embellishment, this approach interprets such language as data with political ramifications; evidence of the affective register states deploy to construct the identity of refugee populations and justify differential treatment. This methodology is particularly relevant to the case of Indonesia, where the gap between formal policy and diplomatic practice is vast and where this gap can be most clearly explained through the emotional logic governing each register.

Analytical Corpus and Data Selection

This paper is based on a theoretically guided interpretation of an analytically chosen corpus covering the period from 2015 to 2025. This chronological range is particularly significant as it includes the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis, the enforcement of Presidential Regulation No. 125/2016, and recent shifts in domestic sentiment regarding the arrival of Rohingya refugees in 2023–2024. Rather than comprehensive statistical summaries, this article focused on sources that convey dominant emotional narratives and patterns of representation. The data set was categorized into three main layers. The first layer consisted of policy and Institutional Documents: These sources include government statements, presidential speeches, foreign policy statements, and legal documents such as Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016. These sources will be analyzed to identify the use of emotional language, particularly expressions of humanitarian concern, a sense of responsibility, and threats to national security. The second layer comprised Scholarly Literature and Policy Analyses: This study examines literature on refugee governance in Indonesia and Southeast Asian migrant regimes as key interpretative texts for analysing the emotional grounds behind state practices. The third layer included documented Case Studies and Secondary Accounts: This article discusses empirically based studies on the Rohingya crisis and explores the emotional dimensions of Indonesia's foreign policy on Palestine and the Rohingya, examining emotions such as solidarity, compassion, pride, and ambivalence (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026). This layer provides “field” evidence of how affective pragmatism functions in real-time emergency situations.

Analytical Strategy and Positionality

This analysis is conducted through three interrelated dimensions: the formation and mobilization of emotions (solidarity versus fear), the identification of emotional focal points in political memory (particularly the legacy of the 1955 Bandung Conference), and how these are reflected in policy differentiation or selective humanitarianism.

The authors' positionality as ‘insiders’ within the Indonesian academic context strongly informs the adoption of a postcolonial lens. This dual perspective serves as a methodological strength, allowing heightened sensitivity to local normative values, such as the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil' alamin* (mercy for all creation) and the Acehese maritime customary law of *Panglima Laot*, which are frequently marginalized within Eurocentric International Relations (IR) frameworks. Being “insiders” in the national discourse allows the authors to deconstruct how global liberal norms, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, are filtered and adapted to align with familiar identities within the local context. This method prioritizes theoretical contributions and conceptual clarity, aiming to uncover how emotions and memory shape the logic of acknowledgement and the hierarchy of global concern.

From a methodological perspective, the inside perspective carries inherent biases that must be considered. Being familiar with the national rhetoric can lead to blind spots regarding assumptions taken for granted in Indonesian policy narratives, particularly with regard to the elevation of sovereignty as an indisputable starting

point in humanitarian decision-making. To address this, the analysis adopts a critical distance from the state's official narrative framework, interpreting policy documents and diplomatic statements not as depictions of who Indonesia “really” is, but as the image Indonesia intends to present. This approach is consistent with interpretive methodology in international relations (IR), which views all texts, including academic texts, as contextual products, rather than transparent reflections of reality.

Scope and Limitation

This study applies an interpretative approach that balances the breadth of empirical data with the depth of analysis. While not attempting to provide a holistic overview of all refugee policies in Indonesia, this paper focuses on the Rohingya crisis and the conditions of transit migrants. These two cases were selected for their high analytical value in elucidating the logic of “affective pragmatism” in state policy. Therefore, refugee populations from other regions as well as internally displaced groups fall outside the scope of this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rational-institutional and empiricist-positivist approaches have long dominated IR, and one consequence has been the marginalisation of emotional and affective dimensions, treated as subjective, irrational, and methodologically elusive. The past two decades have pushed back against this. A significant body of scholarship on emotions, affect, and political memory has emerged, making the case that emotions are not peripheral to politics but constitutive of it, that they shape collective identities and historically constructed global power dynamics (Ahmed, 2004; Berenskoetter, 2014; Hutchison, 2016). Emotions tie political actors to particular memories, draw boundaries between insiders and outsiders, and define what is even considered morally or politically relevant in world politics.

Understanding the paradox at the heart of Indonesia's refugee governance, humanitarian leadership abroad, and restriction at home cannot be done through an institutional or capacity lens alone. A constructivist lens is relevant to discussing these dynamics not as “institutional failure” but as intentional norm contestation. In International Relations, a constructivist argument implies that the state will act not only based on material interests but also guided by collective norms, values, and identities (Littlefield, 2012; Wendt, 1992). The desire to be seen as a “humanitarian leader,” a “good international citizen,” and a “responsible and ethical member of the international community” is a social construct built on humanitarian values (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026). States act in accordance with mutually agreed-upon norms and principles (Wendt, 1992). From this perspective, Indonesia's indecision can be viewed as a political dynamic involving a struggle between various competing normative approaches.

Affective Pragmatism as a Mechanism of Norm Contestation

This analysis is based on two key constructivist concepts: the localization of norms and the performative dimension of identity. According to Amitav Acharya (2004), the localization of norms describes how governments do not simply adopt or reject global standards; rather, they actively sift through and adapt them to fit local contexts. This process is crucial for understanding how refugee governance works in Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, the global regime of liberalism and its implications for refugee protection often contradict the 'ASEAN Way', a political culture deeply rooted in sovereignty, non-intervention, and consensus (Caballero-Anthony, 2005). From the perspective of norm localization, Indonesia and ASEAN do not explicitly reject humanitarian values. Rather, each has adapted these values to their local contexts, thereby creating a "localized humanism" that aligns with regional norms. This framework allows Indonesia to actively engage with platforms such as the AHA Centre while upholding the principle of 'cooperation without interference.' Indonesia is demonstrating that humanitarian actions can be symbolic, intended merely to meet regional expectations without compromising ASEAN's fundamental principle of non-intervention (Triyana et al., 2022).

To fully understand Indonesia's ambiguous refugee policy, "affective pragmatism" must be situated within a broader framework than the debate over normative conflicts alone. Although the mainstream literature on international relations often associates Indonesia's non-participation in the 1951 Refugee Convention with "limited capacity" or institutional failure, this article argues otherwise. The authors argue that the decision not to ratify this convention constitutes a deliberate and planned strategy of norm rejection. Rather than simply disregarding global standards, this rejection is a process in which local actors actively negotiate, filter, and reshape international norms to align them with domestic priorities. While Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) foundational model of norm dynamics traces how norms emerge, cascade, and internalize through a linear lifecycle, this framework tends to assume a largely rational and discursive process of norm adoption. Affective pragmatism stands apart from conventional models by concentrating on the emotional aspects that form the basis of disputes regarding norms. It reveals that the emotional dimension is significant in the localization of refugee norms in Indonesia. An emotion-based framework involves solidarity of sentiment (fear) and postcolonial grievances that are tempered by history and indicates that the negotiation of norms is intertwined with the emotional collective history of a people.

In this context, the discussion of affective pragmatism represents the primary framework. It helps to understand that, in this particular filtering of universal humanitarian norms, the pro and contra norms Indonesia is advancing constitute dual emotional frameworks. On the one hand, the pro-norms are influenced by post-colonial sentiment and the spirit of solidarity, and therefore, the humanitarian hospitality toward, for example, the Rohingyas. On the other hand, the contra-norms are more influenced by pragmatism and a refugee-containment rationale that places concern for the country's stability and safety as the primary defining value.

Thus, affective pragmatism demonstrates that conflict arises not only from legalistic arguments but also from the strategic mobilization of collective emotions. These sentiments determined which aspects of international norms were “adapted to the local context” and which were quietly set aside, a process rooted in ongoing efforts to build a national identity. If norm contestation describes what is being negotiated, identity performance describes how that negotiation is enacted and given legitimacy, in front of both domestic and international audiences. The two are mutually reinforcing: selective humanitarian emotion only works politically if it maps onto a credible identity narrative the state has built over time.

The second constructivist dimension is identity performance in statecraft. A state's identity is not fixed; it is continuously produced and reproduced through what we might call “identity work”: the ongoing presentation of a particular self-image in world politics (Wendt, 1992). States behave in accordance with both tangible interests and collectively communed norms, values, and meanings of whose identities they want to embody. Indonesia's foreign policy is certainly a glaring instance of this performance, in which its position was long anchored by a desire to be seen as a humanitarian and peace-making actor (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026). This performative dimension of identity is also reflected in Indonesia's affective foreign policy narratives, particularly in cases involving Palestine and the Rohingya (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026). What makes this identity performance particularly durable is its institutional embeddedness. Prabandari, Ketaren, and Segara (2025b) examine how governance norms established during the Indochinese refugee crisis (1975–1996) continue to shape modern policy. In particular, the logic of providing only temporary shelter, delegating responsibility to international institutions, and framing displacement as an “extraordinary” phenomenon, rather than a structural reality, has been perpetuated through processes rooted in historical trajectories. Historical precedents serve as institutional pillars, which ensure that Indonesia's current responses remain grounded in a long tradition of pragmatic detachment.

Affective pragmatism plays a role here, arising at the intersection of local norms and expressions of identity. It also explains how states strategically use emotions, such as empowerment, solidarity, or fear, to navigate the tension between international expectations and concerns about domestic sovereignty (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026). As the foundation of refugee governance, affective pragmatism gives rise to selectivity in the provision of humanitarian protection in host countries, a phenomenon known as “selective humanitarianism.” Such selectivity creates a moral hierarchy, a normative framework that determines which forms of suffering deserve greater attention, which victims are deemed credible, and which historical experiences are (politically) relevant to those in power (dominant powers) (Pace & Bilgic, 2019).

The Politics of Exclusion and Affective Precarity

The politics of exclusion is a significant component of this theoretical framework. Who is included and who is excluded from the narrative about

humanitarianism reveals the center of power relations and the moral ordering of international relations. The fact that some groups are excluded from consideration of compassion and protection is a political decision meant to reinforce power relations and preserve the status quo. In the case of refugee governance, this means that some refugees are considered worthy of protection, while others are deemed less important and therefore pushed to the margins. This selective humanitarianism highlights the inadequacy of universalistic human rights claims and necessitates a deeper analysis of how emotions and memories drive these political practices.

The result of this affective pragmatism is a highly fragmented politics of exclusion. By determining which refugees are deemed 'worthy' of empathy based on emotional or historical ties, the state creates what Giorgio Agamben (1998) refers to as a 'state of exception.' In this condition, human bodies are specifically reduced to 'bare life', physically present within the territory yet stripped of legal and moral protection. Under this logic, refugees are no longer regarded as subjects possessing inherent rights; instead, they become objects of pity or securitization, fluctuating according to the state's internal emotional register.

This exclusion is further exacerbated by the concept of precarity, as described by Judith Butler (2009), wherein precarity is the unequal distribution of the universal condition of precariousness, produced by political factors, in which certain groups suffer as a result of the weakening of social and economic networks and become more vulnerable to injury, violence, and death. Within Indonesia's refugee system, uncertainty is distributed unevenly. Affective pragmatism creates a moral hierarchy regarding care: while some refugees are temporarily accepted through "politics of compassion," others are marginalized into a "luxury limbo" (McNevin & Missbach, 2018), where they are administratively invisible and emotionally distanced. This "affective exclusion" ensures that refugee protection remains a matter of state discretion and emotional whim rather than a predictable legal obligation, effectively maintaining the precariousness of transit populations as a tool of border control.

In the Indonesian context, a "state of emergency" is not declared through formal legislation but is enforced through the bureaucracy's failure to respond to the emergency. Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016, for example, contains no provisions regarding local integration or legal protection against forced eviction. As a result, refugees interact with the state primarily through mechanisms of management and control, rather than through rights or recognition. This structural uncertainty is further exacerbated by instruments that appear humanitarian, such as shelters and registration systems, yet simultaneously block the path to permanent legal status. For transit refugees from Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq, this has resulted in years of legal limbo: they remain physically present in the region yet are excluded from the political and moral community that defines who qualifies as a legitimate subject of protection.

In its broadest sense, the tensions between norms, the expression of identity, and the politics of exclusion form a unified analytical framework; it is through these elements that affective pragmatism can be seen not merely as a label for

inconsistency in Indonesia, but as a concept that explains the logic of selective humanism. The following sections apply this framework empirically, examining how postcolonial memory shapes human identity in Indonesia, how securitization causes emotional exclusion, and these two forces combine to form an enduring moral hierarchy of concern among refugee populations across various situations.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The Postcolonial Memory: Bandung 1955 and the Humanitarian Identity

The political memory's foundational dimension is dominant in shaping a state's emotional response toward international crises. In Indonesia's case, its memory of colonialism and the consequent struggle for independence has profoundly shaped its international policy formulation. The 1955 Bandung Asian-African Conference is a landmark event in this historical journey. In Bandung, Indonesia witnessed for the first time the emerging solidarity of the postcolonial world, the anti-imperialist struggle, and the assertion of the Global South's Self in International Relations. Today, the "spirit of Bandung" is still alive, serving both emotionally and politically to bind the state and its citizens to a social memory of postcolonial activism and to a social advocacy for an equitable and socially just international system.

The utilization of historical memory to combat structural inequality in the postcolonial global order has been explored in depth in Bhambra's (2014) work. In the Indonesian context, this memory is manifested through sympathy and solidarity with those identified as victims of systemic violence, colonialism, and oppression. Anti-colonial identity in Indonesia explains the deep emotional solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, which has inspired and mobilized both state and civil society activism (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026).

The postcolonial humanitarian identity and its memory create a domestically and internationally expected role for Indonesia to operationalize the good global citizen behavioral role of protecting the vulnerable. This role profile is embedded in Indonesian diplomacy. Indonesia demonstrates its ethical conduct and responsible behavior as a member of the global community through its engagement as co-chair of the Bali Process and its participation in regional humanitarian dialogues. As the scale of the Rohingya humanitarian crisis in 2015 escalated, images of the stranded boat people in Indonesia evoked emotional responses. Shared religion (as Muslims) and the persecution of Rohingya as a minority created narratives of empathetic and post-colonial solidarity. Acehese communities, based on Islamic humanitarian traditions and the customs of *Panglima Laot*, displayed exceptional hospitality in rescuing and accommodating refugees, often in advance of the central government (Fitria, 2020). However, this response remained limited and conditional, reflecting broader patterns of strategic ambivalence identified in Indonesia's foreign policy (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026).

Yet emotional responses are not universal, and the engagement described is highly selective. The post-colonial memory and humanitarian emotion described are highly contingent on the framing of the crisis and its alignment with Indonesia's dominant identity narratives and strategic interests. Selective historical experiences

are legitimized, activated, and recognized internationally, while other experiences are ignored, depoliticized, and marginalized (Olick, 2013; Subotić, 2019). The emotional connection to the Rohingya crisis is indeed strong; however, that emotional connection it is heavily influenced by the situation and is temporary, reflecting the impact of state sovereignty on humanitarian responses.

The selective nature of this emotional engagement becomes clearest when we examine how the Bandung legacy is operationalized rather than merely invoked. Indonesian policymakers have consistently invoked the historical memory of Bandung as a rhetorical resource in multilateral settings, deploying the principles of non-alignment and anti-imperialism to justify their reluctance to fully align with what they frame as a Western-dominated refugee protection architecture. Thus, the refusal to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention is not viewed as indifference to human suffering, but rather as a principled affirmation of postcolonial sovereignty, a refusal to accept a normative framework whose claims universality obscure historically rooted power relations. Consequently, the postcolonial memory of Bandung serves a dual purpose: as an emotional foundation for human solidarity and as a shield of sovereignty against binding legal obligations.

That rhetoric, nonetheless, also reveals the shortcomings of postcolonial memory as a guiding principle for humanitarian action. The “Spirit of Bandung” is selectively applied: it echoes most strongly when the crisis involves Muslim minorities or peoples who were colonized, whose experiences mirror Indonesia’s own history. The Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority that fled a predominantly Buddhist country, fit this narrative well, which explains the strong emotions and civil society response in 2015. In comparison, asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq do not fall into this category. Because their sufferings do not trigger such associative memories, the state’s response has automatically shifted toward a logic of securitization, which will be analyzed in the following section.

The case of Aceh might be the clearest example of how affective pragmatism works at various levels of government. When Rohingya boat refugees arrived on the shores of Aceh in May 2015, the local fishing community, guided by the customary maritime law *Panglima Laot* and the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil ‘alamin* (mercy for all creation), rescued and took in the refugees even before official instructions were issued by the government.

In this context, the subnational response is imbued with emotional logic, whereas the national response, which has been slow, cautious, and conditional. The central government recognized the crisis only after civil society and the international media had shifted the government’s inaction into a politically untenable position. The emotional altruism of the local response and the political pragmatism of the national response show that the emotional complexity of the national response is multi-faceted and that local communities, religious groups, civil society, and the central government operate in a contested space that is marked by different and, at times, intense emotional complexity. In this context, postcolonial human beings are even more fragmented and complex than the official diplomatic rhetoric suggests.

The Politics of Fear Securitization and Emotional Exclusion

The empathy that appears in postcolonial memory is absent from the logic of state art, which is rooted in fear, anxiety, and the urge to control. In Southeast Asia, the humanitarian crises that result from migration and displacement have been heavily securitized, framed primarily not as crises but as threats to national security, social stability, and economic prosperity. The most concerning aspect of the process of securitization is that it uses emotional registers of fear to legitimize exclusionary policy and border control (Buzan et al., 1998).

The politics of fear that underlies Indonesia's domestic refugee policy is clearly visible in Indonesia's diplomatic humanitarian practices. Indonesia's refusal to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention is a prime example of this politics of fear. Concerns regarding national sovereignty, the potential for “pull factors,” and economic issues related to the refugee population dominate the domestic legal framework, particularly in Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016, which views refugees primarily as administrative and security matters, rather than as human rights issues. The regulation focuses primarily on policies related to the interception and sheltering of refugees and their subsequent deportation or resettlement, and is intentionally devoid of commitments to the local integration of refugees (Kuncoro & Prabandari, 2024). This reflects the tension between affective humanitarian narratives and institutional constraints that shape Indonesia's policy responses.

The responses to the refugee and asylum-seeker problems of persons from Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq transiting Indonesia to reach Australia exemplify the state's perceived location of refugees in the political and humanitarian vacuum of the state. The use of the terms ‘unregistered’ or ‘illegal migrants’ creates gaps in the rights of these individuals and denies them the political status necessary to exercise those rights.

In this discourse framework, emotional marginalization is permissible to the extent that policies may be implemented without eliciting the level of moral repulsion experienced during the Rohingya crisis. The state bears the negative impacts of foreign migration, which are then legitimized and normalized to the extent that forced displacement contributes to economic development aimed at alleviating the local community's distress. Negative incidents and the perceived economic desperation of Afghan and Sub-Saharan African migrants to Indonesia are consistently reproduced in the Indonesian media, leading to the conclusion that they are migrants to Indonesia. Such coverage negatively impacts the media (Missbach, 2015). When comparing media coverage of Sub-Saharan Africa and Afghanistan to coverage of the Rohingya in 2015, the media's use of images of women and children in vulnerable positions traveling by boat to imply victimhood and incite an emotional response to assist them poses stark differences. Differences in the media's portrayal of the two contexts do not only reflect existing public perceptions; to some degree, the media's portrayal of the two groups creates emotional hierarchies in which some groups of refugees are perceived as humanitarian cases (like the Rohingya), and other groups of refugees are perceived as simply administrative cases to be attended to.

The current migration crisis exhibited by Southeast Asia poses a troubling paradox. The 'ASEAN Way,' which encouraged safety and stability in the region, is now a reason to neglect the suffering and humanitarian crisis at the regional borders. Indifference to obligations at the border does not satisfy the requirement of the directive principles of non-intervention from functional interstate war; however, it does mean state impunity to inflict suffering on people and a lack of collective responsibility to inflict suffering on people and a lack of responsibility on the part of the anti-people and positive-collective fails to satisfy the entire collective responsibility (Davies, 2008). ASEAN's deadlock on the Rohingya crisis further highlights this; the regional order has been consistently prioritized over humanitarian action, thereby effectively hindering efforts to provide a comprehensive response to the needs of refugees in the region.

A careful reading of Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 clarifies how the state language itself creates this emotional segregation. This regulation deserves attention both for what it includes and for what it conspicuously omits. It sets out detailed procedures for the apprehension, detention, and monitoring of refugees and asylum-seekers, language that emphasizes management and control, yet makes no reference whatsoever to long-term solutions, local integration, or the right to work. The term "protection" appears in the document particularly in the context of national border security and social order, not in the context of safeguarding the rights of refugees (Kuncoro & Prabandari, 2024). The form the text takes is an affective move: it places refugees as the target of administrative gaze, not as given subjects, and it situates the state's relational indifference as a form of given tolerance, and not a situational obligation. The sharp contrast between this mechanism of regulation and the affective tactics of pragmatism (relational regulation), on the one hand, and the humanitarian rhetoric of Indonesian diplomats in the multilateral forums of the Bali Process and the ASEAN Summit, on the other hand, is proof of this situation. One of the politics of fear is also interlinked with broader geopolitics, and Indonesia's refugee policy is shaped by external factors, such as Australia.

From the context of the Australia-Indonesia relationship, this situation is an example of what can be described as the "externalization of fear" where the domestic responsibility to secure the nation from the fear of refugees is not only the refugees' own destination from Australia but is also caused by Australia's practice of sending refugees back to Indonesia and Australia's own "Sovereign Borders" policy to secure the refugees in vessels away from Australia. It also places refugees up to Indonesia, shifting the responsibility and the need to control the refugees back on Indonesia (Missbach, 2015). Indonesia's resistance to being formally recognized as a "safe third country" under Australian law, a status that would legally require it to process asylum claims, has been a key factor behind its refusal to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention. In this regard, Indonesia's domestic refugee policy, shaped by a security-oriented perspective, is not merely a product of its internal political culture; it has also been co-shaped by bilateral relations with Australia. Ultimately, the power imbalance creates an emotional political dynamic focused on burden-shifting and the protection of sovereignty.

The fear and politics of securitization in Indonesia have resulted in selective humanitarianism. Framing migration as a security issue allows the state to justify exclusionary policies and rational indifference, resulting in an empathy deficit. This policy framework further marginalizes already vulnerable populations and reinforces the fragmented, state-centric refugee governance of Southeast Asia. To fully contend with these issues, there should be a focus on the outer limits of securitization and the need to construct an inclusive framework to accompany the empathetic limits regarding forced migration.

Moral Hierarchies of Care in Practice

The interaction of humanitarian compassion and the politics of fear generates moral hierarchies of care. These hierarchies establish which kinds of suffering are considered worthy of attention and which victims are deemed legitimate. In Indonesia's refugee governance, this hierarchical structure is clearly visible in the differentiated treatment of various refugee groups. This unequal configuration reflects what has been described as affective solidarity coexisting with strategic ambivalence in Indonesia's foreign policy behavior (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026). Prabandari, Ketaren, and Segara (2025b) describe the result as “structured ambivalence,” a configuration in which humanitarian credibility is maintained internationally while the domestic arrangement remains deliberately restrictive.

Most emotionally resonant, and therefore most privileged in the hierarchy, are the groups that most closely reflect Indonesia's postcolonial and religious identity, including the Palestinians and, to some extent, the Rohingya (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026). The Rohingya crisis produced a significant emotional and political response, which included temporary shelter and diplomatic outreach. The articulated humanitarian suffering of the Rohingya was politically described as a crisis of humanitarianism, which demanded action; however, it was more of a civil society and religious organization diplomatic response as a bottom-up ethical pressure. This demonstrates that local humanitarian actions can supplement or challenge state frameworks. These dynamics mirror broader findings that emotional solidarity does not always translate into sustained policy commitment (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026).

Between the emotionally activated Rohingya at the top and the largely invisible transit migrants at the bottom, there is a more ambiguous middle tier: Afghan asylum seekers in Indonesia. Afghans are among the largest and most long-standing transit populations in the country; many have spent five to ten years in Indonesian cities without legal status, employment rights, or realistic prospects for resettlement (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2024). Their situation attracts occasional civil society attention and limited UNHCR assistance, but they do not benefit from the mnemonic or religious resonance that the Rohingya crisis activated. They are not legible within the postcolonial solidarity frame; Afghanistan was not a Dutch colony, and the persecution they flee does not map neatly onto Indonesia's national historical memory. Nor are they sufficiently “visible” as a security threat to generate the kind of securitized attention that would at least render them politically salient. The

outcome is a state of emotional detachment: it is not a temporary empathy extended to the Rohingya, or active ostracism directed at suspected human traffickers, but rather a kind of administrative indifference that may be the most structural consequence of the moral hierarchies, namely violence that is treated as ordinary.

At the lowest level of the hierarchy, and in stark contrast to what has been described before, there is the large group of the so-called “transit” refugees who are stuck in Indonesia in the endless quagmire of legal ambiguity. Frequently, those refugees are not involved in religious or geopolitical conflicts, such as the ones faced by the Rohingya ethnic group. The state’s exclusionary legislation is fully imposed upon them. Their situation is described as a “chronic” or “intractable” bureaucratic problem.

This has led to “empathy fatigue,” which, in turn, has eroded the nation’s moral compass (Bashir & Goldberg, 2018). A comparative look at the response to the Rohingya refugee crisis highlights the disparity, whereby it is the disparity itself, not the suffering, that triggers moral concern. These disparities reinforce the suffering intertwined with a clear narrative of injustice, one that resonates with Indonesia’s own historical memory (Prabandari & Darmawan, 2026).

The unequal treatment of refugee populations in Indonesia ultimately reveals the nature of the global humanitarian system in which it operates, not as a homogeneous system, not as a system that responds to universal rights, but as a fragmented system dictated by post-colonial inequities, which are emotional, and a cumulative burden of suffering, who are deemed to be deserving of sympathy (Bhambra, 2014; Kinnvall, 2018). Indonesia’s selective humanitarianism is neither an anomaly nor a policy failure. It is a clear illustration of how emotions and memories determine who is considered and who is ignored.

This moral hierarchy is also reflected in the portrayal of various groups in public discourse. The Rohingya, for example, are often portrayed as vulnerable victims of state-sponsored violence, which evokes sympathy and a desire to protect them. The discursive differentiation between the “genuine refugee” and the “economic migrant”, a dichotomy that Betts and Collier (2017) consider analytically problematic and politically consequential, operates in Indonesian public discourse as an emotional filtering mechanism, which from the outset determines who is entitled to sympathy and who can legitimately be excluded from protection. Auethavornpipat's (2025) examination of negative emotional reactions towards the Rohingya in Malaysia also demonstrates how the reclassification of refugees as “illegal economic migrants” in public discourse enables the normalization of an exclusionary policy without provoking the moral outrage typically sparked by an overt rejection of humanitarian norms. Conversely, other transit refugees are often portrayed as economic migrants or people who are opportunistic, thereby weakening their asylum claims, and in turn marginalizing them from humanitarian aid. These differing perspectives on these various groups reinforce a moral hierarchy and legitimize the selective humanitarianism demonstrated by the state.

Moreover, the compassion social order, while influenced by the spirit of the times, is more of a fluid construct. The case of the Rohingya reflects this fluid

sensitivity. At the start of the crisis, there was an overwhelming wave of support and compassion for the Rohingya crisis, but as the crisis got protracted, the burden of the social and economic hosting of the refugees grew, and support for the Rohingya started to dwindle. This created an emotional void, which left the refugees exposed and opened the door for the escape of the refugees. This selective social order of compassion and empathy forces the Rohingya to remain at the top of the social and moral order, deprived of once-given compassion and social support. This is the effect the social order of compassion and empathy has, and it is profound in the social order of refugees.

The flaws of the order of social empathy and compassion in the refugee crisis were painfully clear at the end of 2023. In Aceh, once known for its sheer compassion for refugees and the hosting of refugees in Indonesia, students and the community started to hold protests for the relocation of the Rohingya refugees who were temporarily hosted at the community centers and shelters in Banda Aceh and Sabang. The shift from a socially pragmatic and compassionate social order of empathy and compassion in 2015 to social and grassroots pragmatism reflects the passage from self-proclaimed sympathy-based pragmatism. The Rohingya crisis ruled the refugee crisis and shifted the acute crisis to a prolonged refugee reality, and social and emotional order continued to reshape the perceptions of shared victimhood in 2015. The replaced narratives were framed around social and economic competition and around perceptions of self-safety and the host nations cultural and religious identity.

This reveals the state-society dynamic, in which the pragmatic dimension is vulnerable to material and political change and has replaced the post-colonial affective dimension's value investments in solidarity. From a theoretical standpoint, this change highlights that moral hierarchies in the domain of care are dynamic and subject to considerable political and affective shift.

For those on the bottom rungs of this hierarchy, the implications of this change are far from speculative. Being in a state of legal indefiniteness is a concern that has implications for a person's health, dignity, and prospects of a better future and also means that you are unable to leave and are unable to work. These outcomes are the product of a governance system and therefore cannot be explained as a type of institutional failure beyond the state's control. Instead, it is the result of a series of decisions concerning who deserves to be protected and whose claims are, in effect, of no consequence to the state.

These hierarchies of care, as they manifest in refugee governance in Book Indonesia, reveal the state of care achieved through the intersection of feeling, memory, and rational choice. The emotional politics of care that humanitarianism espouses and the politics of memory that govern recognition and forgetting are the means by which the control and exclusion of the most vulnerable populations are sustained and contained. This analysis calls for a more principled form of care within humanitarianism and a more humane intergovernmental system.

CONCLUSION

This article elaborates on the concept of affective pragmatism to address the patterned yet contradictory attitude of Indonesia to dealing with refugees. It argues that the paradoxes characterizing Indonesia's policy responses are not attributable to explanations of institutional weakness and policy capacity. Rather, they start from the postcolonial, emotionally charged pragmatism that governs concerns about sovereignty, security, and the regional order.

The analysis has traced the political memory of anti-colonial struggle and the Bandung Conference, and examined the role that emotions of solidarity, compassion, and moral obligation play when mobilized politically. These emotions help construct Indonesia's humanitarian identity and its claim to global responsibility, but their application is selective, shaped by identity narratives, geopolitical calculations, and institutional arrangements.

As a conceptual contribution, affective pragmatism is known to have strayed from the existing framework in several key respects. Unlike norm localization, international norms through local frames, affective pragmatism foregrounds the emotional mechanisms through which this filtering occurs, revealing that what gets localized and what gets excluded are determined not only by institutional capacity or strategic interest but also by historically sedimented feelings that bind certain populations to the state's moral community and render others invisible to it. Unlike the concept of "selective engagement" in foreign policy analysis, affective pragmatism is not merely descriptive of inconsistency but explanatory of its internal logic: the selectivity is not random but patterned by the affective resonance of postcolonial memory and the emotional grammar of securitization. And unlike humanitarian exceptionalism, which tends to focus on formal legal carve-outs, affective pragmatism operates at the level of feeling, framing, and narrative, making it particularly suited to analyzing refugee governance in contexts where formal legal frameworks are deliberately absent or incomplete.

This article demonstrates the selective nature of moral hierarchies of care. There is a marked increase in the level of empathy and political agency when confronting the suffering of the Rohingya and Palestinians and a conspicuous absence of both when addressing the condition of transit migrants and other less visible displaced populations. Indonesia's foreign policy behavior reveals a spectrum of affective engagement: relatively stable and sustained in cases like Palestine, but far more volatile and conditional in the domain of refugee governance, where emotional investment is activated episodically and dissipates as crises become protracted. By doing so, this article bridges three critical analytical gaps; it situates the phenomenon within the broader logic of norm contestation, traces its regional dimensions through Indonesia's structural engagement in ASEAN, and demonstrates its historical depth by exposing path-dependent continuities stretching from the Indochinese exodus to the contemporary Rohingya crisis.

The study contributes to the complex debates in International Relations by asserting that emotions in global politics are not secondary to global political processes. The study suggests that emotions are central to political praxis, including how nation-states interpret political crises, assign responsibility, as well as how they articulate the political geographies of inclusion and exclusion. The analytic

limitations of the politics of emotions are also acknowledged. Remote emotional engagement, as studied here, is not enough to sustain politically humanitarian engagements. It is also subject to the regulation of legal systems; geopolitical and regional normative systems, including ASEAN's Principle of Non-Interference; and other means related to politically defined national interests.

The study emphasizes the significance of the interplay among historical context, identity, emotions, and other institutional limitations within the Global South, specifically in the case of Indonesia, which sets a unique governing paradigm. It illustrates the powerful and defining space of emotional politics framed as affective solidarity as a basis for the morality of political leadership.

Several further research directions emerge from this analysis. First, to complement the discursive and structural framework developed in this study, future research utilizing ethnographic or survey methods is essential to capture refugees' firsthand lived experiences regarding the affective exclusion to which they are subjected. Second, the subnational dimension of affective pragmatism, evident in the contrast between the local responses of the Acehnese community and central government policies, calls for systematic comparative studies across various regions of Indonesia and among ASEAN member states, where local emotional logic may differ significantly from national-level discourse. Third, the temporal dynamics of the moral hierarchy in care, illustrated here by the shift in Acehnese solidarity toward the Rohingya between 2015 and 2023, calls for longitudinal research designs capable of tracking how affective orientations shift as a humanitarian emergency transition into a protracted displacement situation. Fourth, the role of digital media in reinforcing or challenging the emotional framing of refugee populations is a significant yet under-explored dimension: the speed at which emotional narratives spread through social media platforms may be altering the timeline of empathy and backlash in ways that existing International Relations frameworks cannot yet analyze. Finally, a comparative study applying the framework of affective pragmatism to non-signatory countries in the Global South—specifically India, Bangladesh, and Kenya—could determine whether the emotional patterns identified here reflect a broader regional trend or a uniquely Indonesian phenomenon.

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