

## Crossroads of Belief: Religious Conversion and the Political Dimensions Among Indigenous Peoples in Indonesia

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### Abstract:

*This research examines the political dimensions of religious conversion among Indigenous Peoples in Indonesia, focusing on the experiences of the Baduy in Banten, the Akur Sunda Wiwitan in West Java, and the Suku Anak Dalam in Jambi. It aims to understand how political structures—particularly state policies and identity politics—drive religious conversion, often under the pretext of social inclusion. While conventional studies on conversion emphasize psychological or sociocultural factors, this research situates conversion within the broader framework of political hegemony and state control over officially recognized religions. Employing a qualitative methodology, this research draws on fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis, integrating anthropological, sociological, and political science approaches. The findings indicate that religious conversion among Indigenous groups is often not spiritually motivated but rather a strategic response to institutional discrimination, legal exclusion, and the pursuit of citizenship rights. This highlights the crucial role of state power in shaping religious identities and marginalizing traditional belief systems. By foregrounding the non-Western realities of political coercion and exclusion, this research contributes to the decolonization of conversion studies. It calls for policy reforms that uphold religious freedom and protect Indigenous religious identities within a pluralistic and democratic framework.*

**Keywords:** Religious Conversion, Indigenous Peoples, Political Hegemony, Identity Politics, Indonesia

### INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion in Indonesia remains a pressing socio-political phenomenon that extends beyond individual spiritual experiences, often entangled with issues of legality, citizenship, and state ideology. The public visibility of religious conversions—particularly those involving public figures, such as Deddy Corbuzier in 2019, whose conversion video garnered millions of views—highlights the persistent societal fascination with this subject. The widespread dissemination of conversion narratives on social media platforms, including Dondy Tan's YouTube channel, which features over a thousand videos, further reflects a growing cultural preoccupation with faith transitions. While such cases are often framed as personal or theological matters, they serve as entry points into broader discussions on the intersection of religion and state power. In Indonesia, conversion frequently arises not solely from personal conviction but as a response to structural and bureaucratic pressures. This highlights the need for academic inquiry that conceptualizes conversion not merely as an individual choice but as a practice shaped by social and political forces. Accordingly, this research examines the conversion experiences of Indigenous Peoples in Indonesia, where religious change is deeply intertwined with state-driven frameworks of recognition, legitimacy, and identity.

The academic research of religious conversion has historically centered on its psychological and experiential dimensions, particularly within Western frameworks. Foundational thinkers such as William James define conversion as an inner transformation that resolves existential dissonance and leads to spiritual harmony. His work laid the groundwork for subsequent studies that examine conversion through psychological, sociological, and anthropological lenses (Buckser & Glazier, 2003; Gooren, 2010; Poston, 1992). Scholars like Rambo (1989) argue that conversion must be understood as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by personal, social, and cultural factors. Western approaches primarily emphasize individual volition and identity reformation, particularly during adolescence, often interpreting conversion as a rational integration of prior experiences. However, these models inadequately engage with the political structures that shape religious life, especially in non-Western societies where state regulation of religion is pervasive. Gooren (2010) critiques these frameworks for neglecting contemporary religious pluralism and the role of the state in conversion processes, advocating for more dynamic approaches. Yet, even Gooren's "conversion career" model—which conceptualizes conversion as a lifelong trajectory—fails to fully account for the political instrumentalization of conversion in contexts such as Indonesia. This oversight highlights a critical gap that this article seeks to address.

The Indonesian case reveals the extent to which politics permeates religious identity, particularly through legal and bureaucratic mechanisms that restrict religious plurality. Marriage laws, for instance, require affiliation with a recognized religion, compelling individuals to convert for legal validation. Article 2(1) of Law No. 1/1974 states that a marriage is valid only if conducted according to religious teachings, a stipulation that effectively coerces conversion in interfaith unions. Brice (2015) observes that Westerners in Indonesia often convert to Islam not out of personal conviction but to fulfill these legal requirements. Historical moments of crisis have also triggered mass conversions, as seen during the 1960s and 1970s, when political instability prompted millions of Javanese to adopt Christianity as a survival strategy (Willis, 1977). These examples illustrate that conversion in Indonesia is not merely a spiritual act but often a political necessity shaped by structural constraints. This phenomenon, therefore, calls for a reconsideration of dominant conversion theories to account for the coercive roles played by state apparatuses and legal frameworks in religious transitions.

Among those most affected by state-sanctioned religious frameworks are Indigenous Peoples whose traditional belief systems fall outside the six state-recognized religions. Communities such as the Baduy in Banten, the Akur Sunda Wiwitan in West Java, and the Suku Anak Dalam in Jambi have faced systemic pressures to convert. These pressures manifest in restricted access to civil rights, including marriage registration and citizenship documentation, both of which often require formal religious affiliation. For instance, between 1979 and the 1990s, over a thousand Baduy reportedly converted from Sunda Wiwitan to Islam or Christianity (Suryani, 2021). Similarly, in Kuningan, West Java, members of the Akur Sunda Wiwitan community were compelled to convert to a recognized religion to legalize their marital unions (Sukmana, 2014). These cases illustrate how the Indonesian state marginalizes Indigenous religiosities and enforces alignment with dominant religious paradigms. Rather than isolated incidents, such conversions reflect broader patterns of structural assimilation and religious homogenization driven by political and legal imperatives.

The present research aims to examine religious conversion among Indonesia's Indigenous Peoples, with particular emphasis on the political forces driving these transformations. Unlike previous scholarship that prioritizes psychological or cultural

explanations, this research highlights how state laws, bureaucratic mandates, and sociopolitical pressures shape conversion processes. Employing a multidisciplinary approach that integrates anthropology, sociology, and political science, this research conceptualizes conversion as a politically situated act. This research addresses the following questions: How do legal frameworks and bureaucratic structures influence the religious choices of Indigenous Peoples in Indonesia? In what ways do these mechanisms function as instruments of governance, and how do Indigenous communities negotiate, resist, or accommodate such pressures? By engaging with these inquiries, the research not only fills gaps in the existing literature but also advances critical discussions on religious freedom, state power, and identity politics in Southeast Asia.

To answer these questions, this research employs a qualitative methodology, incorporating fieldwork conducted in Banten and Kuningan between 2017 and 2022, as well as interviews conducted in Jambi in 2021. Primary data consist of personal narratives and interviews with community members, supplemented by secondary sources such as media reports and academic publications. A thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and meanings in conversion experiences, particularly those shaped by state coercion. This methodological framework facilitates an in-depth exploration of how individuals and communities interpret their conversions—not merely as spiritual transitions but as responses to socio-legal constraints. It also highlights the agency exercised by Indigenous Peoples within restrictive religious regimes, offering insights into resistance, adaptation, and identity reconstruction. Through this empirically grounded approach, the research amplifies Indigenous voices that are often marginalized in both scholarly and policy discourses.

This research situates the phenomenon of religious conversion within Indonesia's broader political and legal framework. It examines three case studies—the Baduy, the Akur Sunda Wiwitan, and the Suku Anak Dalam—to illustrate how religious conversion among Indigenous Peoples is driven more by political imperatives than by theological conviction. These empirical findings are then analyzed in relation to existing conversion theories, highlighting the distinct interplay between religion and politics in non-Western contexts. Ultimately, this research argues that religious conversion in Indonesia cannot be fully understood without considering the structural and institutional forces that shape and often predetermine individuals' religious identities. By doing so, it broadens the theoretical scope of conversion studies while offering critical insights into the lived experiences of Indigenous communities navigating state-sanctioned religious paradigms.

This research contributes to the academic discourse by reframing religious conversion as a political act intricately embedded within the governance structures of the Indonesian state. Its findings carry significant implications for policy, particularly in recognizing the rights of Indigenous Peoples to preserve their belief systems without coercion. Furthermore, it encourages scholars and policymakers to reconsider dominant narratives of religious freedom that presuppose voluntary faith transitions. By centering the experiences of Indigenous communities, this research advances a more nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of conversion—one that acknowledges both individual agency and the constraints imposed by political systems. By doing so, it underscores the urgency of protecting religious diversity and pluralism in an increasingly homogenized religious landscape.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Politics of Religion in Indonesian

Studies on religious conversion have primarily focused on psychological, anthropological, and sociological perspectives, with limited attention given to the political dimensions. In Indonesia, however, the politics of religion has played a significant role in influencing, and in some cases, compelling the conversion of individuals, particularly those adhering to *kepercayaan*. This section will examine the relevant laws and regulations that have shaped, and at times, enforced religious conversion. Through this examination, it will become clear how influential political factors are in driving religious change in Indonesia.

This issue arose when the state differentiated between Indigenous religions (*kepercayaan*) and major religions (*agama*) in its political framework. In order to manage religious affairs in the newly independent nation, the state established the Department of Religious Affairs on January 3, 1946. Given that religion is managed by a government ministry, it is unsurprising that numerous laws, regulations, and decrees concerning religion have been enacted. For example, Article 29, sections 1 and 2, of the Indonesian Constitution state: “The state is based on the belief in the One and Only God” and “The state guarantees the freedom of every citizen to adhere to their religion and to worship according to their religion and belief” (Saidi (ed.), 2004; Seo, 2013; Suryani, 2021).

The terms *agama* and *kepercayaan* have created ambiguity, raising the question of whether a belief system constitutes a religion or refers to something distinct. The prevailing interpretation is that “religion” refers to the major religions recognized by law, specifically Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, as outlined in Law No. 1/PNPS/1965. However, this law does not designate official religions in Indonesia but rather addresses the Prevention of the Misuse and/or Religious Blasphemy (Butt, 2020).

The People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) issued Provision No. XXVII/MPRS/1966 on Religion, Education, and Culture in 1966. This provision notably refrained from referring to “religions adhered to by most Indonesians,” instead using the term “religions recognized by the government,” without specifying the names of these religions. Later, Decision No. IV/MPR/1978 further clarified the state’s position by asserting that belief systems are not equivalent to religions and that the government has a duty to prevent them from being treated as such (Seo, 2013; Suryani, 2021, p. 164).

In 1969, a joint regulation was established between the Department of Religious Affairs and the Department of Home Affairs under No. 01/BER/MDN-MAG/1969, affirming the state’s guarantee of religious freedom. The regulation mandated the government to guide, support, and protect religious development and the practice of worship. Article 1 of this regulation allowed the regent or mayor to authorize religious propagation, provided that, as outlined in Article 2, such activities did not lead to disintegration among religious adherents, were not conducted through intimidation, inducement, or coercion, and did not violate laws, security, or public order. In these matters, the regent or mayor would be assisted by the head of the local Department of Religious Affairs (Saidi (ed.), 2004; Seo, 2013; Suryani, 2021).

In 1978, the Department of Religious Affairs issued two significant decisions—No. 70/1978 on the Guidelines for Religious Outreach and No. 77/1978 on Religious Aid in Indonesia. These were later consolidated into a new joint regulation, No. 1/BER/MDN-MAG/1979, concerning the Guidelines for Religious Outreach and Foreign Aid to Religious Organizations in Indonesia. Article 1 of this joint regulation outlined its purpose as regulating religious propagation and international aid while promoting religious harmony. Importantly, the regulation was not intended to restrict religious guidance,

development, or propagation. Furthermore, Article 4 of the regulation specified that religious proselytization should not target individuals who were already adherents of a religion. Notably, the term *kepercayaan* was absent from this decision (Saidi (ed.), 2004; Suryani, 2021). In other words, followers of *kepercayaan* could be targets of da'wa (Islamic outreach) or mission activities.

Lastly, Law No. 6/1974 on the Main Guidelines for Social Welfare assigned the responsibility for religious matters in resettlement villages, specifically the duty of converting isolated communities to one of the state-recognized religions, to the Department of Religious Affairs. In response, the department published *Metodologi Da'wah Kepada Suku Terasing* (Methodology of Da'wa to the Isolated Societies) in 1978/9, a manual outlining the conduct of da'wa activities among these groups. As part of this initiative, the *Da'wah Kepada Suku Terasing* (Da'wa to Isolated Societies) program was developed, with one of its objectives being "to develop religious life, which means to transform their belief from dynamism-animism to the belief in one God" (Fathuddien et al., 1979).

### **Three Cases of Indigenous Peoples' Religious Conversion**

In order to explore how the politics of religion in Indonesia has influenced followers of *kepercayaan* to convert, this section will first examine the conversions of the Baduy in Banten, the Akur Sunda Wiwitan in West Java, and the Suku Anak Dalam in Jambi to major religions. The next section will delve deeper into the ways in which, based on the experiences of these Indigenous Peoples, religious conversion in Indonesia is heavily influenced by the politics of religion.

#### **The Conversion of the Baduy**

The Baduy community, an indigenous group in Banten Province, is divided into two main groups: the Baduy Dalam and the Baduy Luar. The Baduy Dalam adhere strictly to their ancestral traditions and reject modern technology, while the Baduy Luar have begun to embrace technology and adapt to the outside world (Kurnia & Sihabudin, 2010). Research by Suryani (2021) reveals that the Baduy's conversion to state-recognized religions was influenced by limited access to land and population growth. This led to their participation in resettlement programs initiated by the Indonesian government in the 1950s. Although these programs aimed to provide land, they also had the hidden objective of encouraging the Baduy to convert to state-recognized religions, particularly Islam and Christianity. The government's resettlement efforts, underpinned by Law No. 6/1974, sought to "civilize" isolated communities by integrating them into the national socio-religious framework, which included promoting religious conversion.

When the resettlement villages of Gunung Tunggal (Cipangembar 1 and 2) were established in 1977, 80 Baduy families relocated there. In 1985, the regent of Lebak, Oman Sachroni, distributed land certificates in the villages and encouraged the Baduy to choose one of the five state-recognized religions. Of the 50 families who remained in the villages, 20 chose Christianity, while the rest converted to Islam. As a result, approximately 80 Baduy individuals embraced Christianity (Suryani, 2021, p. 150).

The Baduy religion, Sunda Wiwitan, like other Indigenous belief systems, is not officially recognized by the Indonesian state. This marginal status, coupled with religious motives, has made the Baduy a primary target for missionary efforts by both Muslim and Christian groups. Islamic organizations such as the Lembaga Dakwah Khusus (LDK) Muhammadiyah and Jamaah Tabligh have actively engaged in religious outreach among the Baduy (Burhanuddin, 1990). Similarly, Christian missionaries, notably Ismail Amaloh and Kharel Budiman Silitonga, played a significant role in conversions during the 1980s, leading to tensions with local Muslim communities. These conflicts intensified as both religious

groups competed for land, recognizing access to land as a critical factor in securing converts (Suryani, 2021).

The Baduy have long sought official state recognition for their land and religious rights, particularly regarding Sunda Wiwitan. Their efforts have included challenging government land claims and advocating for the inclusion of Sunda Wiwitan on national identity cards. Although certain legal protections exist for their land and customs, the Indonesian government only recognizes six official religions, thereby excluding Sunda Wiwitan. In 2011, the option to list Sunda Wiwitan on identity cards was removed, causing frustration within the Baduy community. The village head, Daenah, voiced concerns over this policy, citing Article 29 of the 1945 Constitution, which guarantees religious freedom. On 23 November 2017, Baduy representatives visited the Ministry of Home Affairs to demand the reinstatement of Sunda Wiwitan on electronic ID cards, as approximately 4,000 Baduy individuals remain unable to register their religious identity due to the current regulations (Suryani, 2021, pp. 218–227).

### **The Conversion of the Akur Sunda Wiwitan**

Akur Sunda Wiwitan is an Indigenous belief system primarily practiced by the Sundanese people in Cigugur, West Java. Founded by Pangeran Madrais (1833–1940), the religion emerged following his spiritual awakening. Originally educated in a pesantren within an Islamic tradition, Madrais reportedly experienced a divine revelation between 1845 and 1849, prompting him to embark on a personal quest for truth. His journey culminated in Cigugur, where he interpreted the dualities of existence as manifestations of divine mercy from the Creator (Sukmana, 2011, 2014). Madrais spread his teachings and established Cigugur as the focal center of Akur Sunda Wiwitan, influencing surrounding regions such as Kuningan, Indramayu, and Bandung. His advocacy for indigenous spiritual autonomy and religious freedom brought him into conflict with Dutch colonial authorities, leading to his arrest. However, he was later released due to a lack of conclusive evidence. Madrais remains revered as a spiritual guide, known for his distinctive theological contributions (Sukmana, 2014).

In 1964, the Indonesian government declared Akur Sunda Wiwitan a forbidden religion under Decision No. 001/KPTS/DM/1964, effectively prohibiting its followers from conducting marriages based on their traditional beliefs. As a result, the community came under surveillance by the Community Belief Supervisor (PAKEM). This restriction created significant uncertainty among adherents, prompting Tedja Buana, the religion's leader, to seek assistance from the Catholic Church of Cirebon. In response, he advised his followers to convert to one of the five state-recognized religions. Consequently, approximately 5,000 members converted to Catholicism (Sukmana, 2011, 2014).

Dewi Kanti, a practitioner from Cigugur, has emphasized the challenges faced by Sunda Wiwitan followers due to the lack of official recognition. This absence of recognition has led to administrative obstacles, such as identity card fields being left blank or marked with a dash. As a result, many adherents have converted to state-recognized religions to navigate bureaucratic difficulties, leading to a decline in the number of Sunda Wiwitan followers in West Java (<https://tirto.id/pindah-agama-karena-tragedi-1965-cvve>).

The Kuningan Regency Government's refusal to recognize Akur Sunda Wiwitan as an Indigenous legal community threatens their living space and ancestral land, both essential for their sustenance and environmental preservation. Despite submitting an application for recognition in April 2020, the request was denied on the grounds that it did not meet the criteria outlined in Ministerial Regulation No. 52 of 2014. Djuwita Djatikusumah, leader of Akur Sunda Wiwitan, condemned the decision as discriminatory and a direct threat to their community's survival. She argues that the regulations applied are

outdated and fail to reflect the current realities of Indigenous Communities, perpetuating the historical pressures faced by Sunda Wiwitan followers.

An instance of discrimination occurred when the construction of the Akur Sunda Wiwitan cemetery was halted due to the absence of a Building Permit (IMB) and concerns that the site might be used for religious worship. Despite being located on private land, the local authorities, supported by Islamic mass organizations, sealed the site. The SETARA Institute condemned this action as bureaucratic discrimination, highlighting that the IMB application was rejected because of lack of community support and objections from the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI). Halili Hasan, a representative of the SETARA Institute, warned that such discrimination, particularly in West Java, could have broader implications for national security if left unchecked.

### **The Conversion of Suku Anak Dalam**

The Suku Anak Dalam, also known as the “Orang Rimba,” is an Indigenous group in Jambi Province. They face significant challenges in preserving their traditional nomadic lifestyle and animist beliefs. The forces of modernization and deforestation, particularly the conversion of forests into palm oil plantations, have increasingly compelled them to convert to Islam as a means of survival. The necessity for official identification, such as an identity card (KTP), to access basic services like education and healthcare further influences their decision to convert (<https://kumparan.com/yayan-hidayat/harapan-palsu-negara-dan-problem-pindah-keyakinan-suku-anak-dalam-sad/full>).

In recent years, Islamic groups such as the Front Pembela Islam (FPI) and Hidayatullah have played a key role in facilitating the conversion of the Orang Rimba to Islam. This process typically begins with children, who are seen as more receptive to religious education. Muhammad Yusuf, a tribal leader of the Orang Rimba, acknowledges that the decision to convert is largely driven by practical survival needs in a society governed by external norms. This decision also reflects the Orang Rimba’s inability to protect their forests from burning and encroachment. The conversion is seen as a necessity in the face of deforestation, which has rapidly destroyed local ecosystems, pushing the Orang Rimba to abandon their traditional lifestyle. The palm oil plantations replacing tropical forests have worsened the situation, making it one of the fastest rates of deforestation in the world. This massive loss of land has deprived the Orang Rimba of access to the natural resources that have sustained their way of life for generations (<https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/majalah-41937911>).

Some Orang Rimba have settled in new communities and adopted more modern lifestyles. Although they long for the forest and their traditional way of life—where the forest is central to their spirituality and culture—many still lack the necessary identity cards. Around 200 of the 3,500 members of the Orang Rimba in Jambi have converted from animism to Islam in hopes of securing a better life and gaining access to official identity (<https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/majalah-40304342>). While some Orang Rimba see urbanisation and religious conversion as solutions, many feel these changes threaten the sustainability of their culture. Some tribe members, like the tribal leader Mail, resist conversion due to its conflict with their traditions and their fear of misfortune, such as tiger attacks (<https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/majalah-41937911>).

In Sungai Abang Village, Kecamatan VII Koto, Tebo Regency, Jambi, approximately 40 individuals from the Suku Anak Dalam (SAD) community have embraced Islam. The process, which included reciting the *shahada* and undergoing mass circumcision, was led by Ustadz Imaduddin and Ustadz Muhajirin from Pesantren Al-Inayah Rimbo Bujang. This pesantren plays a key role in supporting the SAD community by providing Islamic education and economic assistance, particularly since newly

circumcised SAD men are temporarily unable to work (<https://www.nu.or.id/daerah/40-orang-suku-anak-dalam-di-jambi-masuk-islam-S9xJa>).

The government seeks to assimilated the SAD into the dominant social structure by relocating them to permanent settlements, effectively dismantling their nomadic identity. Hasbullah Al Banjary from the Ministry of Social Affairs underscores the need to preserve indigenous traditions amid these changes. However, Rukka Sombolinggi from the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN) criticises the government's inadequate protection of indigenous rights. This approach often prioritizes economic and political interests over the well-being and cultural preservation of indigenous community (Muntholib & Nugroho (eds.), 2014).

### **Politics of Religion and Religious Conversion in Indonesia**

While several studies have examined the phenomenon of religious conversion in Indonesia, most focus on personal, spiritual, and sociological factors—such as theological beliefs, psychological experiences, or community pressures. However, the political dimension remains largely overlooked. In Indonesia, where religion and politics are deeply intertwined, conversion decisions are often shaped by power dynamics, government policies, and identity politics. This research addresses this gap by highlighting the political forces behind religious conversion, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how power influences religiosity in Indonesia.

The religious conversion by the Indigenous Peoples Akur Sunda Wiwitan in West Java, Sunda Wiwitan in sBanten, and Suku Anak Dalam in Jambi— demonstrates the deep entanglement of religious conversion in Indonesia with political forces. These include state's hegemony (Gramsci, 2012), major demographic politics (Yadgar, 2020), national identity politics (Pool, 2020), and politics of exclusion (Nollert & Sheikhzadegan, 2023). These cases highlight how political structures and pressures often compel marginalized groups to adopt state-recognized religions as a means of securing legal rights and social inclusion.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony provides a useful framework for understanding the dynamics of religious conversion in Indonesia. According this theory, power is sustained not solely through coercion but also through ideological leadership, which persuades subordinate groups to accept the values and norms of the dominant group as natural. In Indonesian, religion functions as a key site for the enactment of political hegemony, particularly given the state's close alignment with the majority religion (Gramsci, 2012).

Fieldwork conducted in Banten, Kuningan, and Jambi reveals that decisions to convert—whether by individuals or groups— are often shaped by political pressure or local power dynamics. In some cases, indigenous communities whose religions lack state recognition convert to one of the six officially acknowledged religions to secure full citizenship rights. This phenomenon illustrates how the state exercises its political authority to enforce boundaries, compelling individuals to conform not only through direct pressure but also through widely accepted the ideological constructs.

Within Gramsci's framework of hegemony theory, religious conversion can be understood as a form of "consent" to a social order dominated by the majority political power. Through its official religion recognition policies, the state effectively designated certain religions as "more legitimate" than others. This creates a system where minority communities feel compelled to conform in order to gain legal recognition and security. In this way, the state's hegemony extends beyond religious choices, shaping access to social and political rights and reinforcing the dominance of the majority group.

Furthermore, the politics of majority hegemony in Indonesia, particularly among Muslims and Christians, exerts pressures indigenous groups to convert, intertwining religion with power dynamics. The exclusion of traditional religions from official recognition reinforces the dominance of state-sanctioned faiths while marginalizing indigenous beliefs. For instance, over 1,000 Baduy people converted to secure access to land and livelihoods, while the Anak Suku Dalam embraced recognize religions to gain official identity and public services. This reflects how national identity politics shape religious conversion. A parallel can be viewed in Israel's demographic strategies, where conversions policies help maintain a Jewish majority. In both cases, state policies privilege recognized religions, effectively excluding indigenous groups from full civil rights unless they conform to these hegemonic frameworks (Yadgar: 2020).

Identity politics theory also helps explain why religion remains a contested field in Indonesia's political context. As a key aspect of identity politics, religion is frequently leveraged by political groups to reinforce group loyalty and advance specific agendas. This is evident in various political events in Indonesia, where religious identity serves as a tool for political mobilization. In this context, an individual's decision to convert cannot be viewed in isolation but must be understood within the broader political framework, where religion and political identity are intertwined, shaping both personal and collective decisions.

Pool's (2020) conceptualisation of conversion as an ethical transformation shaped by identity politics is particularly relevant here. Indigenous peoples often compelled to adopt recognized religions like Islam or Christianity to align with the dominant political and religious narratives in Indonesia. Their conversions are often frequently a response to state-imposed identity politics, where the exclusion of non-recognized beliefs denies them access to basic rights and social services. For example, the conversion of Akur Sunda Wiwitan community to Catholicism or Islam reflects a broader political strategy for survival within a state that refuses to acknowledge their traditional beliefs.

The conversion of Indigenous People in Indonesia underscores the state's politics of exclusion, pressuring groups like the Anak Suku Dalam to convert to Islam or Christianity for state recognition and access to public services. This dynamic mirrors the fragmentation politics of the Reformation-era, where political shifts shaped religious identities. In Indonesia, the state's prioritisation of recognized religions forces indigenous groups to choose between traditional beliefs and survival. Nollert & Sheikhzadegan (2023) findings on Muslim converts in Switzerland, facing exclusion politics resonate here, as indigenous communities like the Baduy and Akur Sunda Wiwitan struggle to access rights without conversion. Conversion, therefore, becomes a survival strategy, reflecting the intersection of integration and assimilation politics within a socio-political system that excludes their beliefs.

In conclusion, the politics of religious conversion in Indonesia are deeply intertwined in the state's historical and political frameworks. Indigenous groups are marginalized by the state's hegemony, major demographic politics, national identity politics, and politics of exclusion, forcing them to convert in order to survive within a system that privileges recognized religions. These political dynamics shape the conversion experiences of communities like the Baduy, Akur Sunda Wiwitan, and Anak Suku Dalam, highlighting that conversion in Indonesia is often driven more by political than spiritual motivations.

## CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted how religious conversion among Indigenous Peoples in Indonesia is profoundly shaped by political structures, particularly through state policies that favour officially recognized religions. The research reveals that conversion are often not motivated by spiritual concerns but is driven by legal and administrative pressures that marginalize traditional belief systems. Through fieldwork conducted in Banten, Kuningan, and Jambi, involving communities such as the Baduy, Akur Sunda Wiwitan, and Suku Anak Dalam, it becomes clear that religious conversion is frequently a survival strategy in response to socio-political exclusion. These findings reinforce the understanding that religious identity in Indonesia is not merely a personal matter of belief, but is heavily influenced by power dynamics, institutional frameworks, and state intervention. This study affirms that religion serves as an instrument of state control, with Indigenous communities being compelled toward assimilation under the guise of legal conformity and national unity.

This study contributes to reframing the discourse on religious conversion, particularly in postcolonial and plural societies where identity politics play a central role. By incorporating political theory—especially Gramsci’s concept of hegemony—this research broadens the interpretive framework beyond the psychological and sociocultural paradigms, offering a structural-political analysis of religious conversion. Theoretically, the study challenges the conventional view that religious conversion is an individualistic act based solely on spiritual transformation. Instead, it demonstrates that conversion is often a result of structural coercion, legal exclusion, and ideological dominance. Furthermore, this study enriches the anthropology of religion and political sociology by providing empirical insights into how religious boundaries are institutionally constructed and maintained within the Indonesian context. Its multidisciplinary approach also bridges the gap between normative religious studies and critical political inquiry, offering a robust framework for future studies on identity politics, legal marginalization, and forced assimilation in the Global South.

Despite its contributions, this research remains limited in its geographical and demographic scope, focusing primarily on three indigenous groups. Future studies could expand this focus to explore conversion dynamics among other marginalized communities across Indonesia, considering how intersecting factors such as gender, economic class, or ethnicity influence religious and political identities. Additionally, there is a pressing need to critically revisit the binary distinction between “agama” (religion) and “kepercayaan” (belief system) in Indonesian law, and to develop more inclusive frameworks that protect religious freedom in practice, not just in rhetoric. Policymakers must consider the unintended consequences of religious regulations that enforce conformity at the expense of cultural diversity and communal autonomy. Advocating for constitutional clarity, the protection of belief-based communities, and participatory legal reform should become central to ensuring that Indonesia’s pluralistic ideals are more than symbolic. By centering the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples, this study not only offers academic insight but also calls for action toward more equitable and culturally sensitive governance.

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