

# WIMAYA

Interdisciplinary Journal of International Affairs

## Research Articles

A Comparative Study of Syrian Immigrants in Gender Equality Discourse  
and Integration in the UK and Sweden

*Dias Pabyantara Swandita Mahayasa, Salma Kinanti Buldhani*

South Sumatra's Opportunities in Accessing  
ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

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Globalization and Marginalized Groups: Finding Durable Solutions for  
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WIMAYA is an international scholarly journal devoted to international affairs. Published twice a year by the International Relations Department, Pembangunan Nasional Veteran East Java, the journal aims to promote the importance of interdisciplinary approach to analyze various international issues. The journal welcomes empirical and theoretical research articles that seek to cut across disciplines in order to capture the complexity of a phenomenon. The editors also welcome discursive book reviews that contribute to the literature.

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The Editorial Team, WIMAYA  
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Jl. Rungkut Madya No.1, Gn. Anyar, Kec. Gn.  
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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### A Comparative Study of Syrian Immigrants in Gender Equality Discourse and Integration in the UK and Sweden

Dias Pabyantara Swandita Mahayasa  
*Faculty of Social and Political Sciences,  
Universitas Jenderal Soedirman*  
[dias.pabyantara@unsoed.ac.id](mailto:dias.pabyantara@unsoed.ac.id)

Salma Kinanti Buldhani  
*Faculty of Social and Political Sciences,  
Universitas Jenderal Soedirman*  
[salma.buldhani@mhs.unsoed.ac.id](mailto:salma.buldhani@mhs.unsoed.ac.id)

#### Abstract

A significant number of migrants arrived in Europe in 2015, with Syrian refugees accounting for a disproportionate share of these new arrivals. Syria has a poor level of gender equality compared to other European countries such as Sweden and the UK. With an emphasis on the disparities in gender norms between their native country and the host nation, this study aims to examine the phenomenon of gender discourse and the challenges faced by Syrian populations as they integrate into their new surroundings. Strong patriarchal beliefs in Syrian communities make integration complicated and fuel many discussions about gender roles in these groups. This research uses a comparative method to analyze the gender equality discourse and integration experiences of Syrian refugees in the UK and Sweden. Through policy analysis and secondary data from journal articles, the research investigates how gender equality is perceived, communicated, and implemented within Syrian immigrant communities and the broader societal frameworks of both countries. The study reveals distinct national approaches to gender equality and integration, highlighting the impact of these differences on the lived experiences of Syrian men and women.

**Keywords:** Syrian refugees, integration, gender equality, discourse, UK, Sweden

#### I. Introduction

Beginning in 2011, a significant phenomenon known as the Syrian Refugee Crisis resulted from Middle Eastern conflicts, prompting mass migration toward Europe. Sweden, as one of the Nordic nations that supports liberal principles in all facets of its politics, was one of the top beneficiaries of Syrian migrants in Europe at the time. According to Statistics Sweden, 111,199 Syrian immigrants were expected to reside in Sweden by 2022 (Dyvik, 2023). The European Union implemented a quota system in 2015 as a preventive measure against illegal immigration. The EU established an asylum refugee policy allowing Syrian refugees to seek protection in EU member states. According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 82% of people arriving in Europe in 2015 came from four countries: Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eritrea (IOM, 2015). This policy was also intended to distribute immigrants from Italy and Greece more evenly among other EU countries, such as Sweden. On the other hand, some other European countries, such as the UK, did not welcome the EU's Asylum and Refugee mechanism. In response to the EU's Asylum and Refugee mechanism and rising nationalist sentiment, the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016, with immigration concerns cited as a critical factor in the decision (Brady, 2018).

However, the massive migration of Syrian refugees to Sweden also triggered several gender issues. The gender inequality they experience in their home countries is a source of women's health issues in the host



country (Ozcurumez et al., 2019). Syrian women in Sweden report more significant mental health challenges than male refugees, along with social isolation and discrimination (Gottvall et al., 2020), further intensified by their struggles with financial strain and adapting to new social norms (Nissen et al., 2021). For example, regarding the Asylum Seekers' policies that the EU implements, women would be questioned on their arrival in the host country. They would get asked where their husband are or if they are with their father. Even the decisions they make before entering the country are sometimes influenced by their husbands (Day & White, 2002). It resulted in putting women in vulnerable situations as asylum seekers. This phenomenon demonstrates that, in this context, the state, as the agency, has a significant influence, along with the structure, on immigrants.

Integrating Middle Eastern refugees, particularly concerning traditional gender values, faces various challenges. The solid patriarchal values from their home countries often clash with gender equality values that are upheld in Western countries. In Sweden, for example, Syrian immigrants often struggle to adjust to new social norms, including gender equality and female participation in public life. Sweden has implemented various policies to support immigrant integration, including social support services tailored especially for female immigrants and programs for education and job training. However, the integration process is further complicated by the profound cultural and traditional beliefs disparities that many immigrants hold (Mangrio et al., 2018).

The UK is one of the European countries with a high ranking in gender equality. Ranked 6th in the EU with a score of

over 4.8 points above the EU average (EIGE, 2020), the UK demonstrates its ability to maintain gender equality in various aspects. However, back in 2011, while the rates of Asylum Seekers were at their peak, the UK implemented a distinct approach towards its asylum seekers. At that time, extreme views and a new wave of nationalism were on the rise in different European countries, including the UK, and the surge of refugees aggravated the political challenges. The situation caused them to fear immigrants (Brady, 2017), which resulted in different strands of hate crime happening in the country, with one of its highest categories being religious and racial hate crimes.

Sweden and the UK are recognized as two countries that have advanced their gender equality frameworks and share similar values regarding gender equality. However, they have different approaches toward the surge of refugees and immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, specifically Syrian immigrants. Sweden, with its welfare-based approach, focuses on social integration. At the same time, the UK has leaned its policy toward a more security-based framework, prioritizing national security concerns over inclusive refugee integration. Their different approaches resulted in anomalies in their asylum policies.

Additionally, this difference has been reflected in how the UK and Sweden navigate the intersection of gender and migration within their respective contexts and characteristics. Previous European refugee policy research has highlighted how humanitarian obligations, national security concerns, and domestic political ideologies shape state responses. Bloemraad (2006) emphasizes the importance of recognition,



treating migrants as rights-bearing individuals, and redistribution or providing structural support in creating inclusive policies. Studies have also shown that gender plays a critical role in shaping refugee experiences and policy outcomes. For instance, Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond (2016) explore how Sweden's feminist foreign policy centers on representation, while the UK's has been more security-oriented.

Having analyzed the gender context that shaped refugee policy in the two countries, we aim to elaborate on why similar national gender situations breed different approaches to integrating Syrian refugees in Sweden and the UK. Furthermore, this article will focus on how both countries have constructed specific policies toward female Syrian refugees, rather than addressing the national gender situation.

## II. Methods

To get reliable data, we sourced from journals and newspaper articles on Syrian refugees and immigrants in the UK and Sweden. These sources provide valuable insights into the broader discourse on immigration, integration, and gender policies in both countries. They also offer a deeper understanding of how these policies have evolved in response to the influx of Syrian refugees, especially in light of the Syrian civil war that began in 2011. Moreover, the article incorporates interview data from previous researchers, particularly concerning the experiences and integration of Syrian refugees in the UK and Sweden. This combination of secondary sources and qualitative interview data allows for a comprehensive analysis of the

situation in both countries. We also use policy analysis established by these countries to provide a deeper understanding of the formal frameworks that can impact and understand the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating Syrian refugees, with particular attention to the role of gender and social norms.

## III. Gender and Policy Construction

Hearn and McKie (2008) stated that gender constructs policy, as policy constructs gender. When women are more prone to domestic violence than men, we need to recognize and acknowledge the interconnections of policy and gender, emphasizing men as an explicit part of policy analysis. In analyzing the experiences of women and men refugees or immigrants in their host country, gender is one of the key features of their identity and has a significant impact on them. This is due to the differences in social structures between the home country and the host country (Healey, 2010). Thus, examining gender roles within each host country provides insight into how these societal norms shape policies.

Sweden is one of the countries with a high gender equality score among European countries, but its society is still categorized as more individualistic than collectivistic (Hofstede, 2001). A study by Senden et al. (2019) found that women are perceived as more agentic today than they were in the past, whereas the perception of men has remained unchanged over time. In the past, Sweden connected traditional roles with gender, but it has increased over time, creating a more gender-equal society as it is nowadays.





Regarding gender and policy construction in Sweden, as part of the Scandinavian countries, it has been more explicitly expressed and applied as part of their ambition to be part of the Nordic model (Melby et al., 2009). In the Nordic Model, family law and gender relations emerged as the highest-priority issues related to the political importance of gender issues. Other than that, individualism and state responsibility are distinct, with a close interaction between civil society and the state (Berven & Selle, 2001). However, a discourse on Swedish welfare-based gender policy construction, as examined in Diana Mulinari's (2009) research on refugees from Latin America in Sweden, reveals that Scandinavian welfare states often support gender hierarchies within ethnic communities and construct differences among them (Mulinari, 2009). The idea of gender equality in Swedish welfare states is racialized, distinguishing the 'West' from the 'rest of 'us vs. them.' This critique highlights an underlying tension in Sweden's gender policies: while advancing gender equality broadly, they may also unintentionally create divisions within the population.

Compared to Sweden, gender roles are perceived differently in the UK decade by decade. In the 80s, there were stereotypical beliefs about the sexes, where women were perceived as more communal and less agentic than men (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). These strong patriarchal beliefs in British society are reproduced particularly at the household level (Healey, 2010). Walby's (1989) analysis identified six patriarchal structures in the UK: impacting household roles, employment, state policies, violence intervention, sexuality, and cultural institutions. These structures limit women to domestic labor and low-skill jobs

and often reinforce male dominance through state bias, minimal support for violence victims, and restrictive norms in sexuality and media representation (Healey, 2010). Despite these entrenched norms, according to a survey by the National Centre for Social Research, three-quarters of the British public now reject the notion that women should be responsible for the domestic sphere while men are out earning the bread (Gayle, 2018). This growing acceptance of gender equality in the UK suggests a more inclusive stance, though remnants of patriarchal frameworks still influence policies, particularly in the context of refugee integration. These lingering patriarchal values may shape the UK's policy approaches in ways that are less explicitly gender-focused than those in Sweden.

To better illustrate this contrast, the following table summarizes the key differences between the UK and Sweden regarding how gender norms and societal structures have influenced refugee policies in the economy, business, trade, and finance.

**Tab. 1.** Gender-based comparison between UK and Sweden

Aspect	UK	Sweden
<b>Policy Focus</b>	Security-based, counter-extremism	Welfare-based, egalitarian
<b>Gender Lens</b>	Implicit, influenced by patriarchy	Explicit, central to policy
<b>Integration Programs</b>	VPRS & ESOL, limited support (e.g., no childcare, NINO issues)	<i>Etableringsprogrammet</i> & SFI, tailored for women
<b>Support for Women</b>	Often passive, surveillance-heavy	Proactive, inclusive services
<b>Discourse</b>	Suspicious of migrants, especially veiled women	Affirmative but sometimes racialized

**Source:** Authors





*a. Different Gender Relations Breed Different Refugee Policies*

When it comes to accepting Syrian refugees or any non-Western asylum seekers, the UK and Sweden have different approaches to gender relations, which results in different refugee policies. For instance, in the UK, since patriarchal values infiltrated its society before the 2000s, female asylum seekers and refugees have more constraints on their actions than male asylum seekers (Bloch et al., 2000). Under the UK's Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), for example, gender considerations are acknowledged. Despite the considerations, the policy has sometimes fallen short of providing sufficient social support for female refugees, limiting their access to resources, safety, and agency within the resettlement process.

By contrast, Sweden's gender equality framework is influenced by its welfare state or Nordic model, which prioritizes a more egalitarian stance in support of asylum seekers, regardless of gender. Sweden's commitment to gender equality, reinforced through more comprehensive social services, aims to ensure that female refugees have equal access to integration resources and support.

*b. Perceiving Gender Relations*

In the UK and Sweden, gender dynamics and cultural values significantly influenced refugee policies and integration programs. Between 2015 and 2016, there was an increasing concern about child marriages among migrants because the society in Sweden is relatively rare in having spouses who are below 18 years old (Rabo, 2021). This constructs a collectivist value that refugees

from non-Western countries, specifically from the Middle East, have a more significant tendency to contribute to the high prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence due to underage marriage. This created an integration program in Sweden through their Civic Orientation program. It includes a description of Sweden, emphasizing individualism, secularism, and the welfare state model (City of Gothenburg, 2018). These programs emphasize the importance of gender equality, positioning it as a cornerstone of Swedish society and a value that newcomers should understand and adopt.

Similarly, the UK faced challenges in integrating Syrian refugees. With the surge of attacks on refugees and migrants, many women who wore veils were being targeted due to their association with acts of terrorism in Europe. When Theresa May was the Home Secretary, she introduced a requirement that Syrian asylum seekers need to be screened twice to qualify that they are not a part of any terrorist organization. This positions women, especially Muslim women refugees, in such a vulnerable position, which can result in making the integration process harder for them. The increasing surveillance made the integration process more difficult because they were often viewed as suspicious people rather than vulnerable communities in need of protection (Habash, 2023)

*c. Constructing Programs*

The UK and Sweden have different policy approaches regarding gender and immigration. The UK's approach to designing policies for refugees from the Middle East tends to focus more on community cohesion in combating extremism (O'Toole et al., 2016). Governed by several laws promoting equality and protecting the rights of women and other



vulnerable groups, the Equality Act 2010 was the earliest policy designed to consolidate previous laws and provide broader protection against numerous characteristics, particularly gender.

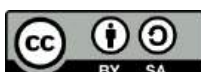
Middle Eastern refugees, particularly those from Islamic nations like Syria, are frequently linked to extreme narratives. In June 2015, the UK collaborated with UNHCR to design a new resettlement scheme for asylum seekers called the VPRS or Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Schemes, which initially focused on women at risk, survivors of violence, and cases with medical needs. Under this scheme, 216 people arrived in the UK (Pereira et al., 2023). However, based on the several interviews that were conducted by UNHCR and IOM from 2015 until 2017, many refugee women have experienced sexual and gender-based violence in their home country, and during their journey to safety, they are also at risk of sexual and gender-based violence once they arrive in the UK (UNHCR, 2017). For instance, the UK has a National Insurance Number (NINO) that refugees can use to access support. Women refugees were not provided with a NINO because they were not the primary recipients or principal applicants on their asylum applications. It results in women being financially dependent on their partners. Some services also often do not have a staff that professionally works with women who are professionals in gender-based violence.

Moreover, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is one of the main initiatives in the UK to support the integration of immigrants and is linked to the VPRS. The government offers English classes to help immigrants improve their communication skills and integrate more effectively into society. In addition to ESOL, the UK government has

developed integration strategies encouraging immigrants to become productive members of British society as quickly as possible. This program can help women asylum seekers integrate more effectively. However, they also face barriers due to their child-caring responsibilities; at that time, the government did not provide a childcare service along with the program.

In contrast, Sweden's approach tends to be holistic and welfare-oriented. It strongly emphasizes comprehensive support for immigrant integration, including initiatives explicitly tailored for immigrant women and promoting gender equality (Edenborg, 2018; City of Gothenburg, 2018: 26). The Deputy Minister of Employment and the Ministry of Gender Equality oversee gender equality policy in Sweden. Swedish government policy aims to give both men and women equal power over how society and their lives are shaped. There are six sub-goals of this vision.

Equal Distribution of Power and Influence, meaning women and men should have the same rights and opportunities to be active citizens and influence decision-making conditions in all sectors of society. Economic Gender Equality encourages women and men to have equal opportunities and conditions for income, thereby providing economic independence. Gender equality in education and opportunities, as well as the equal distribution of unpaid household work and care work, means that women and men should share equal responsibilities for unpaid household work. The fifth is Gender Equality in Health Care and Social Services, where women and men should have equal access to health care and social services. Lastly, male violence against women must be stopped. Women and men, girls and boys, should have equal



opportunities for physical integrity (Nanni, 2023).

In migration studies, push factors drive migrants from their home country, while pull factors attract them to a destination. One of Sweden's key attractions is its reputation as a welcoming country for refugees and immigrants (Gen, 2018). A 2017 research study by Gren found that 93% of Swedes expressed positive sentiment, agreeing that their country should help and support refugees. Nonetheless, the Swedish Prime Minister restricted the number of asylum seekers who might enter Sweden during the height of the refugee crisis by resuming routine border checks and issuing other suggestions. For example, the government replaced the issuance of permanent residence with a temporary residence permit valid for a set amount of time. Furthermore, the Swedish government restricted the rights of family reunification.

To support long-term integration, the Swedish program introduced the Introduction Program, also known as etableringsprogrammet, one of the immigration-related initiatives initiated by the Swedish government. With the support of these customized educational programs, immigrants can acquire Swedish language skills, work, and eventually become financially independent. One part of this program is called *Svenska för invandrare* or Swedish for Immigrants (SFI). The SFI website describes the program: "*We will teach you about society and working life too. Let us help you find the tools you need to be you.*" This statement suggests that the Swedish government aims to fully integrate refugees into Swedish society, without the influence of values from their home countries. The program includes

citizenship orientation, skills training, job placement, job search support, and business consulting (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2016). Through SFI, adult refugees will be divided into three different ranks of SFI based on their ability to read and write in Swedish (Sakinnah, 2019). Beyond the central government, Sweden also promotes integration through the municipality program. Each region assists immigrants in finding accommodation and starting their new lives in Sweden, with different mechanisms in place depending on the area. Most municipalities assist newcomers with SFI, tax payments, financial aid, and healthcare services.

#### **IV. Role of The Political Elites**

The UK and Sweden Policy Makers, as a part of the political elites, have somehow shown a gesture of accommodation towards the Syrian refugee. We observe two patterns drawn from Nancy Fraser's concept of justice, encompassing both recognition and redistribution (Bloemraad, 2018), which have been applied to Syrian migrants. The policies should address material inequality and affirm refugees' identities, including their ethnic, gendered, religious, and legal backgrounds. Recognition acknowledges refugees as subjects of rights, not merely as threats or burdens, while redistribution seeks to correct structural disadvantages through tangible support systems. Using this lens, we can better assess how UK and Swedish political elites framed and implemented responses, especially toward women.

In the surge of the refugee crisis in 2015, the UK's Prime Minister, Theresa May, was willing to accept more Syrian refugees (Mason, 2016). In the New York Summit held



by the United Nations General Assembly, May also proposed three measures: (1) helping refugees to claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, (2) a better distinction between refugees and economic migrants, (3) the right of all countries to control their borders, along with a responsibility to stop uncontrolled migration flows. It has come to our attention that the UK was willing to adopt a humanitarian approach but simultaneously sought to limit the extremist values that refugees could contribute through their proposals (Mason, 2016). In her 2015 speech, entitled "A Stronger Britain, Built On Our Values," May, as Home Secretary, outlined Britain's anti-extremism strategy through the concept of British Values, which focuses on a multi-racial, multicultural, and multi-religious society. *"Everybody living in this country is equal and free to lead their lives as they see fit."* Theresa May also declared that the UK is a free country where everybody can lead their lives, and she expressed her openness towards refugees (Government of the UK, 2015). In addition to that, she also stresses that Islamist extremists promote a fundamental incompatibility between Islamic and Western values, and she calls out that any discrimination against women will not hesitate to be prosecuted. Additionally, the differentiation of refugees and economic migrants might be complex to implement practically due to its complexities, particularly in terms of the gendered approach towards the refugees, where women who are perceived as a vulnerable group might have opportunities to gain financial aid rather than men.

Before 2015, Asylum Seekers had the right to free healthcare on the National Health Service, as outlined in the UKBA 2009; they

were also entitled to accommodation if they were homeless and did not have sufficient funds to purchase food. In terms of higher education, they are required to pay overseas fees and are not eligible for student support, such as hardship loans or access funds (UKCISA, 2007). If they are between sixteen and eighteen, they are entitled to the ESOL program, also known as English for Speakers of Other Languages, classes after lodging their asylum claims within six months. This pre-2015 approach highlights the UK's cautious stance toward asylum seekers, providing essential support but restricted access to broader opportunities, a trend that continued into May's post-2015 policies. While she consistently emphasized her commitment to improving conditions for women, her stance on integration through English language learning fell short of expectations. May argues that immigrants should learn English to reduce the need for translation services (Monaghan, 2015), yet many older, poorer, and less educated women remain heavily dependent on these services (Summers, 2016; Sansonetti, 2016).

*"We want to go further than ever in helping people from isolated communities play a full and fruitful part in British life. We plan a step change in the way we help people to learn the English language. There will be new incentives and penalties, a sharp reduction in funding for translation services, and a significant increase in the funding available for English language training."*

This cautious yet humanitarian approach was further implemented in the pre-existing policies for asylum seekers, such as access to healthcare and basic accommodation, but restricted higher education and employment opportunities. For



instance, in early 2014, before the peak of the refugee crisis, the UK government introduced the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme VPR, which sought to categorize refugees eligible for resettlement based on their vulnerability (Eddin, 2017). While focused on vulnerable groups, the UK primarily treated refugees as objects of humanitarian concern rather than subjects of full political recognition. By the end of 2015, in December, more than 1000 Syrian refugees were resettled under Humanitarian Protection status, granting them permission to work and access to public funds (Gower & Cromarty, 2016). This program specifically targeted victims of sexual violence, the elderly, and people with disabilities. While select vulnerable women were included in the resettlement scheme, this was not matched by a broader effort to affirm their cultural or social identities, suggesting a gap in recognition. Furthermore, the emphasis on refugees learning English and cutting translation services reveals an expectation of assimilation over mutual recognition. Redistribution was narrowly targeted rather than systemic, which led to many refugee women remaining dependent on services with limited access to empowerment tools.

While the UK's approach under Theresa May focused on selective resettlement of vulnerable groups that aimed to control the management of migration flows, Sweden, with its newly appointed Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, affirmed that refugees had the right to protection, those who lacked a legitimate reason for asylum should return (Rabo et al., 2021). In 2014, Sweden stated its commitment as the first self-defined feminist government (Aggestam, 2016). They have a big ambition always to express gender equality and fully employ human rights for all women

and girls (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Wallström, as the minister for Foreign Affairs, referred to what a feminist foreign policy entails, consisting of three Rs: Representation, Rights, and Reallocation. In other words, Sweden wanted to promote and advocate women's rights, including women's protection from sexual and gender-based violence. When refugees are portrayed as gendered in many aspects, this contributes to establishing a view of refugees as gendered (Mikael, 2016).

It reflected Sweden's growing concern about burden sharing among European countries. Löfven's implementation of the "U-Turn Policy" marked a shift in Sweden's traditionally open refugee policy, signaling a more restrictive stance amid rising pressure. Furthermore, this shift was further emphasized by the locals' protest in front of the Swedish Parliament, with slogans such as "*No Jobs and No Welfare*" (Harris & Jesko, 2015). Despite these domestic challenges, Sweden ultimately became one of the European countries that accepted the most Syrian refugees, including women refugees, demonstrating its continued commitment to humanitarian and equality principles. Refugee and migration policies are constantly evolving, with new rules and updates being introduced regularly. The approach offers a more comprehensive alignment with recognition and redistribution principles by embedding gender equality into its refugee response and foregrounding the Three Rs (Representation, Right, Reallocation); the Swedish elite actively affirmed the identities and rights of women refugees. Integration programs, such as civic orientation courses, framed refugees as participants in civic life, not just economic units or passive victims. It manifested through their establishment program; they implemented a





healthy verse integration course through its civic orientation. *"It must be clear which rules apply in Sweden and which values should permeate our society...Sweden is a modern and free country where justice, fairness, and gender equality are central values. They are the result of decades of struggle, and we must take them forward, we will never back down from."* While redistribution also faced challenges, especially after the U-turn policy, the state continued to invest in long-term integration through access to social welfare, housing, and education, demonstrating a more systemic effort to correct inequality, particularly for women. Despite gender forms of racism, there are still areas of empowerment and improvement for their inclusive policies of a women-friendly welfare state.

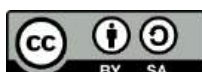
## V. Conclusion

Despite the similarities between the two countries' gender equality situations, they have produced different approaches to gender-based policies toward Syrian refugees. Sweden consistently upholds its foreign policy by integrating both recognition, affirming the gendered identities and rights of refugees, and redistribution, which offers structural support through social programs and integration pathways. In contrast, the UK adopted a more cautious and security-driven stance, offering limited and selective redistribution while falling short in recognizing refugees as rights-bearing subjects, especially women. These divergent paths reflect more profound differences in how political elites conceptualize and enact gender values at the policy level. While Sweden framed refugee women as participants in a gender-equal society, the UK often positioned them as

vulnerable outsiders to be managed. Ultimately, this suggests that the effectiveness and inclusivity of refugee policies depend not only on gender equality commitments in rhetoric but also on how recognition and redistribution are embedded in policymaking practices.

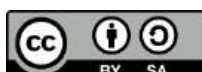
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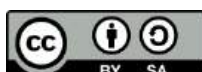




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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### South Sumatra's Opportunities in Accessing ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

Syuryansyah

*Department of International Relations*

*Universitas Sriwijaya*

[syuryansyah@fisip.unsri.ac.id](mailto:syuryansyah@fisip.unsri.ac.id)

Ridha Amalia

*Department of International Relations*

*Universitas Sriwijaya*

[ridhaamalia@fisip.unsri.ac.id](mailto:ridhaamalia@fisip.unsri.ac.id)

Miftah Farid

*Department of International Relations*

*Universitas Islam Negeri Alaudin Makassar*

[miftah.farid@uin-alauddin.ac.id](mailto:miftah.farid@uin-alauddin.ac.id)

#### Abstract

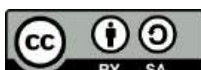
This study aims to explore the role of local government policies in South Sumatra in accessing and enhancing economic cooperation with countries in the Southeast Asian region, particularly within the framework of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Although economic cooperation among ASEAN nations has advanced significantly over recent decades, there is still untapped potential by local governments in Indonesia, including South Sumatra, in contributing to regional economic integration. The research investigates how local economic policies in South Sumatra can strengthen its involvement in the AEC, with a focus on trade, investment, and infrastructure development that fosters connectivity

among ASEAN nations. A qualitative approach with policy analysis is employed to understand the strategies adopted by the government of South Sumatra to promote economic collaboration with ASEAN countries. The findings are expected to identify crucial factors influencing the success or failure of accessing ASEAN market and offer recommendations for improving coordination between central and local governments to enhance South Sumatra's role in the ASEAN economic network. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to the development of more effective regional economic policies that support regional integration and elevate South Sumatra's standing in the ASEAN economic landscape.

**Keywords:** *Local Government, Cooperation, Economy, South Sumatra, AEC*

#### I. Introduction

Economic cooperation among countries in Southeast Asia, particularly within the framework of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has witnessed significant progress in recent decades. A major initiative in this economic integration is the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which aims to establish a single market and integrated production base in the region (Y. Effendi, 2014). Indonesia, as a key ASEAN member, actively promotes economic cooperation between the members of ASEAN. Hence, the role of local governments in



designing and implementing economic policies oriented towards international trade and cross-border cooperation is crucial in achieving this objective (Hatta, 2020).

Local governments hold a strategic position in fostering local economies to support international cooperation. In Indonesia, including South Sumatra Province, regional economic policies directly influence the ability of regions to engage in trade and investment within ASEAN. Local governments serve as intermediaries between national economic policies and more specific local-level implementations, enabling regional key sectors to access international markets (Sabaruddin, 2015). Research shows that openness to international trade enhances resource allocation for producing goods and services, which in turn can absorb labor and reduce unemployment (Febryastuti, 2019).

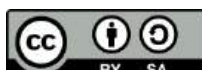
South Sumatra possesses key sectors with the potential to enhance economic cooperation with ASEAN countries. The agriculture sector, particularly palm oil and rubber, stands out as one of the most significant. Data indicates that South Sumatra is one of Indonesia's leading producers of palm oil and rubber, with considerable potential for export to ASEAN countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam ((BPS), 2020). Additionally, the renewable energy sector, especially with biomass and hydroelectric, presents promising prospects for fostering closer economic ties with ASEAN countries committed to sustainability and carbon emission reduction (Widyawati et al., 2021).

Despite its potential, South Sumatra faces significant challenges, particularly related to infrastructure disparities that limit

cross-border trade connectivity. Developing port infrastructure, such as Tanjung Api-Api Port, is a strategic step to enhance the competitiveness of South Sumatra's key products in international markets. (Ardine et al., 2023). However, the lack of efficient transportation networks in some areas hampers goods distribution and increases logistics costs (Hounsounou et al., 2021).

In addition to infrastructure challenges, discrepancies between central and local government policies often hinder the implementation of economic policies effectively. Research by Park (2024) highlights that misalignment between centrally focused macroeconomic policies and locally oriented sectoral development policies can slow the implementation of initiatives supporting international economic cooperation. Therefore, it is essential to improve coordination between central and local governments to achieve optimal economic integration (Lee, 2022).

The role of local government economic policies in strengthening international economic cooperation also pertains to the development of export-oriented key sectors. Agriculture, renewable energy, and port infrastructure in South Sumatra can serve as a starting point for designing economic policies that support international trade with ASEAN countries. Policies promoting foreign investment, industrial development, and workforce training will further bolster South Sumatra's position within the global economic network (Jermsittiparsert et al., 2019). This aligns with Indonesia's long-term goal of reinforcing ASEAN economic integration, wherein each member state is expected to contribute



significantly to regional economic growth (Darmawan et al., 2024).

The renewable energy sector in South Sumatra holds significant potential to strengthen economic relations with ASEAN countries, particularly in the context of their commitment to reducing carbon emissions and transitioning to cleaner energy sources. Cooperation in renewable energy could become a key pillar in fostering economic cooperation, aligned with ASEAN's sustainability commitments and climate change mitigation efforts (Sihombing, 2022). Research by Rusdi et al (2021) suggests that local governments can leverage renewable energy potential to attract investments and develop environmentally friendly technologies that support sustainable economic growth.

The adoption of renewable energy technologies, such as solar power plants and integrated energy systems, can help reduce dependence on fossil fuels, which still dominate Indonesia's energy sources (Sijabat et al., 2024). For instance, implementing solar home systems (SHM) and photovoltaic-integrated water pumps offers environmentally friendly and sustainable energy solutions, particularly for remote communities (Musyafiq et al., 2021; Sunardi et al., 2021). Moreover, the development of green technologies in the renewable energy sector can significantly contribute to carbon emission reduction, a critical aspect of climate change mitigation efforts. These initiatives not only enhance energy efficiency but also support improved environmental safety (Koval et al., 2023).

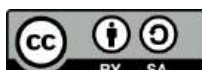
Research on foreign cooperation by local governments has attracted the attention

of academics. For example, Tahalel et al. examined the role of the DKI Jakarta Provincial Government in strengthening its position as part of global metropolitan cities. This study discussed various international cooperation initiatives integrated into regional development planning and provided policy recommendations to optimize cross-border cooperation (Tahalel et al., 2024).

Similarly, Isnaeni (2013), in her study titled "Peran Strategis Pemerintah Daerah dalam Kerjasama Internasional untuk Pembangunan Berkelanjutan," presented a case study of Surabaya, illustrating how international cooperation serves as an effective mechanism for achieving sustainable development agendas. The study emphasized the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration in integrating sustainable development goals into local policies (Isnaeni, 2013).

Additionally, studies on the role of local governments in ASEAN sub-regional cooperation, particularly the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), have highlighted how local governments in South Sumatra can leverage sub-regional cooperation to accelerate tourism development and optimize local resources (S. Effendi et al., 2024). This research emphasizes the importance of exploring local resource potential and harmonizing government policies to support regional economic integration.

Economic cooperation between ASEAN member has become a central focus in studies exploring the role of local government policies in supporting regional economic integration. Research indicates that strengthening logistics sectors and port





development supported by local policies can significantly increase cross-border trade volumes within ASEAN (Ansofino, 2016). Furthermore, the development of integrated regional transportation infrastructure can enhance cross-border trade efficiency by up to 25% (Kartiasih, 2019). These findings highlight the critical role of transportation and logistics infrastructure policies in the context of ASEAN economic cooperation.

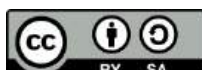
Renewable energy sectors, such as biomass and hydroelectric power, also hold significant potential for driving economic cooperation within ASEAN. Policies offering foreign investment incentives and supporting environmentally friendly energy technologies are key to unlocking this potential (Heirina & Ayub, 2024). Research by Nazipawati (2023) reveals that economic growth in South Sumatra is influenced by road infrastructure and workforce quality, emphasizing the importance of local policies in supporting key sectors such as agriculture and renewable energy.

While numerous studies discuss the general role of local governments, a significant gap exists in literature focusing on specific regions like South Sumatra, with its unique key sector characteristics (Nazipawati, 2023). This research aims to fill this gap by exploring multisectoral integration, including agriculture, energy, and infrastructure, relevant to enhancing ASEAN economic cooperation. Moreover, addressing the issue of policy misalignment between central and local governments remains critical, as it often hinders the implementation of policies supporting international economic cooperation (Tinambunan et al., 2020).

Hence, it is imperative for South Sumatra's local government to formulate economic policies not only centered on developing key sectors but also on strengthening infrastructure capacity, enhancing human resource quality, and improving coordination between central and local governments. This approach will ensure that South Sumatra can seize existing opportunities in ASEAN economic cooperation and contribute to stronger regional economic integration. This study aims to analyze the role of economic policies implemented by South Sumatra's local government in supporting access and active participation in the AEC by exploring strategies to elevate the province's position within ASEAN's economic network.

## II. Methodology

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the role of the local government in South Sumatra in enhancing economic cooperation among ASEAN countries. A descriptive qualitative approach is chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena, such as the economic policies implemented by local governments. According to Sugiyono, qualitative research is a method employed to gain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of an object, producing descriptive data in words or observable actions (Sugiyono, 2015). In this context, the study utilizes secondary data, including regional economic policy documents, annual reports, and trade data from relevant institutions such as the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) and the Ministry of Trade. These documents provide essential insights into the



policies implemented and their impacts on cross-border economic cooperation, particularly within the ASEAN context.

The data analysis technique used is thematic analysis, where data collected through document studies are categorized based on themes relevant to the research focus, such as economic policies and challenges in international cooperation. This process involves comparing data from various sources to ensure the validity and consistency of findings. Source triangulation—a method to strengthen data reliability by comparing information from multiple reports and previous studies—is also applied in this research (Sukamto, 2016). This aligns with Sugiyono's emphasis on the importance of triangulation in qualitative research to enhance result accuracy. The study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the role of local governments in fostering regional economic integration and ASEAN cross-border cooperation. This is a critical issue in the context of globalization and regional cooperation, offering valuable insights into the interplay between local policies and broader regional economic frameworks.

### III. Discussions

#### *a. South Sumatra's Economic Potential in the Context of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)*

The economic policies implemented by the South Sumatra Provincial Government play a crucial role in promoting economic cooperation among Southeast Asian nations, particularly with ASEAN member states. These policies must align with national strategies and

regional initiatives such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Research by Nazipawati (2023) highlights that economic growth in South Sumatra is influenced by factors such as labor availability and infrastructure, which are essential elements for fostering international economic collaboration. Furthermore, Deru et al. (Deru et al., 2023) emphasize the importance of regulatory actors' behavior in achieving high regional innovation indices, strengthening regional competitiveness in international cooperation.

South Sumatra's government is expected not only to focus on local economic growth but also to actively enhance engagement in international economic partnerships. Hatta and Nursanty (2020) underscore the need to identify key sectors, such as agriculture and renewable energy, to boost competitiveness and collaboration with ASEAN countries. For example, the palm oil and rubber sectors hold significant potential for increasing exports and strengthening ties with ASEAN nations that offer vast markets for these products.

South Sumatra boasts several key sectors with significant potential to strengthen economic cooperation with ASEAN countries, particularly in agriculture and renewable energy. Among these, palm oil stands out as one of the most dominant sectors. As one of Indonesia's leading palm oil producers, South Sumatra contributes over 30% of its total exports to this commodity (BPS, 2024). High demand from ASEAN countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines presents a substantial opportunity to expand the province's international market presence



within the framework of ASEAN economic cooperation.

The province's palm oil plantations span over 700,000 hectares, primarily managed by independent farmers and large corporations (BPS, 2024). This production is vital for maintaining the stability of vegetable oil supply across Southeast Asia. Such a strategic position highlights South Sumatra's potential not only as a leading producer but also as a pioneer of sustainable plantation management practices.

However, rising international market concerns regarding sustainability present a significant challenge for the palm oil sector in South Sumatra. Sustainability certifications like Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) are crucial for enhancing product competitiveness in global markets. Despite its importance, ISPO adoption remains limited, particularly among independent farmers (Hutabarat, 2018). To address this, the provincial government must provide training and incentives, enabling farmers to adopt environmentally friendly practices and meet international standards (Dharmawan et al., 2021; Pandiangan & Ernah, 2019).

Palm oil's significance extends beyond exports. The sector is instrumental in creating jobs and driving infrastructure development in South Sumatra. According to the Ministry of Agriculture (2023), the palm oil industry supports over one million jobs directly and indirectly across the province. Additionally, revenue from palm oil exports has funded various development programs, such as rural road improvements, better education access, and enhanced healthcare services for local communities.

Ensuring the sustainability of the palm oil sector requires addressing environmental challenges while maintaining high production levels. Collaborative efforts among local governments, private companies, farmers, and international organizations are essential to achieve economic growth alongside environmental protection.

ASEAN economic cooperation presents significant opportunities to expand the market for palm oil products, which are in high demand in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines (Widyaningtyas & Widodo, 2016). ASEAN member states have established platforms to facilitate cross-border trade through market integration and the elimination of tariff barriers. In this context, local government policies that support increased production, quality improvement, and sustainability of palm oil products are essential. Policies such as the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) certification play a crucial role in meeting international market standards, particularly in countries that increasingly demand sustainable products (Novianto et al., 2022).

While palm oil demonstrates significant export potential, the rubber sector in South Sumatra also offers vast opportunities for strengthening regional economic cooperation. As one of Indonesia's largest rubber producers, South Sumatra contributes approximately 24.03% of the country's total rubber plantations, covering 919,500 hectares (BPS, 2022). This sector is a major livelihood source for rural communities, particularly smallholder farmers who dominate plantation ownership. The dominance of the rubber sector is also reflected in South Sumatra's exports, where rubber products constitute the



largest share of the province's non-oil and gas commodity exports (Sasmi et al., 2023).

Rubber production in South Sumatra plays a critical role in supporting downstream industries domestically and exports to ASEAN nations. For instance, the province supplies processed rubber for the automotive industries in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, which require high-quality raw materials for manufacturing tires and other vehicle components (Fauzi, 2021). In 2023, South Sumatra accounted for 43.47% of Indonesia's total processed rubber exports, underscoring its strong performance in regional trade (Kemendag, 2023; Ramadhan & Fahmi, 2023). The ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) further facilitates this trade by reducing tariffs and improving market access, positioning South Sumatra as a key player in the Southeast Asian rubber trade.

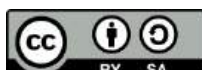
In addition to supporting the trade sector, rubber holds strategic value in driving local economic growth. The rubber plantation sector provides employment for over 1.5 million residents of South Sumatra, including farmers, plantation labourers (BPS, 2024), and workers in the processing industry. Income generated from rubber has contributed to improving rural community welfare and fostering infrastructure development in rubber-producing areas. Local governments also utilize revenue from this sector to support social and economic development programs, such as providing access to education and healthcare services in rural communities.

Despite its strengths, the rubber sector faces significant challenges related to sustainability and product quality. Inefficient farming techniques, limited access to modern

technology, and fluctuating commodity prices hinder farmers' productivity (Khaswarina et al., 2023). Additionally, environmental concerns such as deforestation from plantation expansion require urgent attention to ensure alignment with sustainable development principles (Kotowska et al., 2015). Addressing these challenges requires government support, including training programs for environmentally friendly farming techniques and improved access to modern processing facilities.

To elevate the international competitiveness of South Sumatra's key sectors, strategic steps are needed to develop downstream industries. Currently, most rubber and palm oil exports are in raw or semi-processed forms, which yield lower economic value compared to finished products (Ramadhan & Fahmi, 2023). Developing local processing industries, such as tire manufacturing plants or facilities for producing palm oil derivatives like biodiesel and oleochemicals, could significantly enhance the region's economic value. Encouraging investments in these sectors through public-private partnerships and incentives is crucial.

Sustainability certifications also play a pivotal role in boosting market access for rubber and palm oil products. Farmers adopting sustainable practices have reported productivity increases of up to 20%, demonstrating the dual benefits of higher incomes and environmental preservation. By supporting widespread certification adoption, South Sumatra can strengthen its position in international markets increasingly concerned with sustainability (Junaidi, 2022).



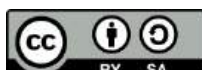
The application of science and technology is another key driver for improving the productivity and efficiency of South Sumatra's agriculture sectors. Utilizing modern technologies, such as IoT-based sensors to monitor soil and crop conditions, can increase yields while reducing resource overuse (Saparita et al., 2019). Moreover, innovations in processing can add significant value to agricultural products, such as producing high-quality palm oil or rubber components tailored for specific industries. Leveraging these technological advancements could boost productivity by up to 30% while significantly lowering operational costs. Digital transformation also presents vast opportunities for optimizing supply chains. Blockchain-based platforms, for example, can enhance transparency and traceability in product sourcing, building consumer trust. Additionally, digital marketplaces can connect smallholder farmers directly with broader markets, including international buyers, thereby expanding their reach (Wibowo et al., 2024).

Beyond technology, innovation and economic productivity are key factors in enhancing South Sumatra's competitiveness in both domestic and international markets. Product diversification serves as a strategic approach to reducing dependence on raw commodities, such as by producing palm oil derivatives like biodiesel, oleochemicals, or palm-based food products. In the rubber sector, the development of downstream industries, such as the production of environmentally friendly tires or rubber-based components for the automotive industry, can have a positive impact on the local economy. This approach not only increases export value

but also creates new employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector.

The implementation of a green economy is a crucial foundation for achieving sustainable growth. By adopting green economic principles, South Sumatra can ensure that economic activities are not solely focused on short-term profits but also consider long-term environmental and societal impacts (Idntimes, 2024). For instance, palm oil waste can be utilized as a raw material for bioenergy, while rubber production can adopt agroforestry techniques that integrate ecosystem sustainability (Hermanto et al., 2021). Moreover, the application of green economy practices in the plantation sector can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by up to 25%, while simultaneously increasing the competitiveness of products in international markets, which are increasingly prioritizing sustainability (Nanda, 2022).

Domestic economic integration between urban and rural areas is crucial for fostering inclusive economic growth. Urban areas can serve as centers for distribution, innovation, and processing, while rural areas remain the primary producers of raw materials (Syafi'i & Mertayasa, 2024). By integrating these regions, South Sumatra can establish a strong and mutually supportive economic value chain. For instance, palm oil processing plants in urban areas can accelerate product distribution to markets, while rural farmers gain access to technology and training. Furthermore, the stability of the financial system at local and regional levels is essential to support investment and sectoral development, particularly by providing credit access to small and medium enterprises





(SMEs) in rural areas (Syafi'i & Mertayasa, 2024).

By implementing these elements in a cohesive manner, South Sumatra has a significant opportunity to strengthen its economic position at both national and regional levels. This approach not only ensures inclusive and sustainable growth but also enhances the province's competitiveness in addressing global challenges. The integration of technological innovation, green economy principles, digital transformation, and regional synergy can create a dynamic and adaptable economic ecosystem.

However, a major challenge lies in sustainability and product quality. Palm oil and rubber commodities are often associated with deforestation and other environmental impacts, which can affect Indonesia's competitiveness in international markets. Therefore, policies should not only focus on increasing export volumes but also on improving product quality and sustainability. For example, in the European Union market, many ASEAN countries have implemented strict sustainability regulations for palm oil trade, which should be a key consideration in South Sumatra's local government policies (Deru et al., 2023).

To address these challenges, South Sumatra must develop policies that widely facilitate product sustainability certifications and provide training for local farmers to adopt environmentally friendly practices, ensuring high-quality products that meet international market standards. A comparative analysis of palm oil export volumes from South Sumatra to ASEAN countries could offer a clearer picture of untapped market potential.

#### *b. Barriers and Challenges Faced by South Sumatra in Leveraging ASEAN Economic Cooperation*

Challenges and obstacles in strengthening international cooperation must also be carefully considered. A study by Sidiq (2023) revealed that external factors – such as commodity price fluctuations – significantly impact regional economic performance, thereby affecting a region's ability to engage in international economic cooperation (Sidiq & Rizqi, 2023). Consequently, it is crucial for local governments to develop adaptive and responsive policies that align with global market dynamics. Some of the key barriers and challenges include:

##### *b.1. Coordination Between the Central and Regional Governments in Policy Implementation.*

Coordination between central and regional governments is crucial in implementing economic policies in South Sumatra. According to research by Rosmery Elsy (2014), implementing fiscal decentralization policies in South Sumatra Province faces several obstacles, including less-than-optimal revenue management and macroeconomic stability. In the decentralization policy, regional governments are given greater authority to manage regional resources and expenditures. However, without good coordination between the central and regional governments, fiscal policies implemented by the central government are often not adjusted to existing local conditions. One example is the implementation of Law No. 33 of 2004 concerning Fiscal Balance between the Central Government and Regional





Governments. This law regulates revenue distribution between the center and regions, but differences in priorities between central and regional policies often lead to suboptimal management of funds. In South Sumatra, this can be seen from the limited allocation of funds for sectors that support local economic development, such as infrastructure and education.

In addition, a study by Marudur Pandapotan Damanik (2019) shows that the South Sumatra Provincial Government faces significant challenges in implementing the South Sumatra Smart Province program, which aims to improve the quality of government and public services through digital technology. This program relies on implementing a technology-based system, but without good coordination between the central and regional governments, this program is often hampered. For example, although the central government has launched various smart city and e-government programs, the South Sumatra Provincial Government still has difficulty adjusting to the standards set. In several government sectors, such as the Population and Civil Registration Service (Dukcapil), services are still carried out manually, such as processing changes of domicile or issuing family cards, which starkly contrasts with other regions that have used digital applications in administrative services. The mismatch between more modern central government policies and local conditions that are not yet ready to be implemented shows how important synergy is between the two parties so that technology-based policies can run effectively.

This obstacle shows that without good coordination between the central and

regional governments, the implementation of technology-based policies and innovation can be hampered, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the planned program—the importance of synergy between the central and regional governments in formulating public policies. Lack of communication and coordination can lead to overlapping and ineffective policies in their implementation (Pardosi, 2023). This is relevant to the conditions in South Sumatra, where differences in priorities between the central and regional governments can hinder the implementation of economic policies that should support regional integration within the framework of the ASEAN Economic Community.

In addition, research by Akmal (2006) shows that coordination between related agencies in implementing regional development in Indonesia is not optimal. This lack of coordination can lead to inefficiency and ineffectiveness in implementing development programs related to regional economic development. The agricultural sector is experiencing obstacles in coordination between the central and regional governments. Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), South Sumatra has a dominant agricultural sector in the regional economy, especially in rice and plantation production. However, central government policies focusing more on large-scale infrastructure development often ignore the region's specific needs to increase agricultural productivity. Government regulations on fertilizer subsidies, for example, are not always received fairly by farmers in the region, which leads to public dissatisfaction. This uncoordinated policy has led to a mismatch



between more macro central policies and local agricultural conditions that require a more specific approach.

Overall, the coordination problem between the central and regional governments in South Sumatra impacts the economic sector and affects other sectors such as education, health, and infrastructure development. The solution to this problem must involve improved communication and better coordination through coordination forums involving all stakeholders. In addition, it is important to formulate policies that are more focused on local needs and conditions so that policy implementation can run more effectively and positively impact regional development.

b.2. Technical constraints include limited infrastructure, lack of access to technology, and sustainability issues

South Sumatra has excellent potential to develop economic cooperation with ASEAN countries but faces various technical challenges that must be overcome to increase competitiveness and accelerate regional integration. Some of the main obstacles this region faces include infrastructure inequality, limited access to technology, and sustainability issues affecting important sectors, such as agriculture and trade. One of the main obstacles hindering South Sumatra's economic growth is limited infrastructure. One of the main obstacles hindering Sumatra's economic growth is limited infrastructure. According to research by Hamzah (2019),

infrastructure development in South Sumatra from 2014 to 2017 has not been fully effective and efficient in driving economic growth. This study shows that road infrastructure, electricity, and other public facilities still need to be improved to support more productive economic activities. According to data from the Kementerian PU (2023), only around 53.43% of the total national roads in South Sumatra are in good condition, while the rest need repair. This affects the efficiency of the distribution of goods and services. The development of Tanjung Api-Api Port can strengthen trade connectivity between South Sumatra and countries in the ASEAN region. With better port infrastructure, cross-border trade can increase, supporting local economic growth, but until now, the development of Tanjung Api-Api Port has not continued (Bagus, 2024). Suppose the development of this port can be continued. In that case, it is hoped that it can strengthen South Sumatra's position in the ASEAN supply chain and increase export and investment opportunities.

In addition to physical infrastructure issues, digital constraints are also a significant challenge. Research by Juairiyah (2019) revealed that the digital gap between urban and rural areas in South Sumatra is quite significant, with internet access in rural areas still limited. This has led to low adoption of information and communication technology (ICT) in the education and economic sectors. These



limitations greatly hinder people from taking advantage of the digital economy's opportunities, which is now one of the main pillars of global economic development. Not only that, the lack of digital infrastructure also impacts the ability of local business actors to access international markets and improve the quality of digital-based public services. (Damanik, 2019).

The issue of sustainability is also a serious concern, especially in the agricultural sector. South Sumatra has a dominant agricultural sector in the regional economy, especially in rice and plantation production. According to data from the BPS (2022), the planting pattern is still dominated by conventional systems, and dependence on chemical fertilizers has led to a decline in soil quality. This leads to a decline in agricultural yields in the long term, which affects regional food security. Implementing more environmentally friendly policies is still limited, and in some areas, existing regulations regarding environmental management have not been fully implemented consistently. For example, the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and the lack of sustainable agricultural practices such as agroforestry or crop rotation must be overcome so that the agricultural sector remains productive without damaging the environment.

In addition, the forestry sector also faces sustainability issues. According to the Forest Watch Indonesia report

(2021), deforestation in South Sumatra is still relatively high, with most forests converted to agricultural land and plantations. This deforestation contributes to climate change and threatens the sustainability of the nature tourism sector, which has great potential in South Sumatra. Better forest management and implementing policies involving local communities in conservation are steps that need to be taken to ensure the sustainability of the ecosystem in this area.

The implementation of the South Sumatra Smart Province program, which aims to improve the quality of government and public services through digital technology, faces significant obstacles related to technological readiness, human resources, and effective governance. Damanik (2019) noted that the lack of data integration between government agencies and poor coordination hamper efforts to achieve it, thereby reducing the program's effectiveness in supporting sustainable and efficient development.

### b.3. Changes in International Market Standards: Demands for Product Quality and Sustainability

Globalization has pushed international markets towards higher standards of quality and sustainability. Countries and international organizations increasingly set strict rules regarding product quality, environmental impacts, and business ethics in global trade. In the context of international relations, this reflects the dynamics of economic interdependence



between countries influenced by economic, political, and environmental interests. For example, the European Union (EU) has implemented strict regulations on palm oil to ensure that the product is free from deforestation practices, creating challenges for exporting countries such as Indonesia, including South Sumatra (Curzi et al., 2018; Liu, 2022).

In the ASEAN region, countries such as Singapore and Thailand are starting to follow the EU trend in demanding sustainability in imported products. Data from the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) reveals that ASEAN member countries are increasingly adopting sustainability policies similar to European regulations, creating challenges for agricultural-producing countries such as Indonesia that have not fully met these standards. According to the theory of institutionalism in international relations, the rules set by international actors will encourage countries to adapt to maintain access to the global market (Gulcemal, 2021). This explains how international market regulations shape domestic policies in developing countries.

From an international relations perspective, increasing product quality standards can be a soft power for developed countries. Developed countries can influence the policies of developing countries through strict trade rules. This can be seen from implementing non-tariff measures (NTMs) regulations, which often challenge countries like Indonesia to meet their export products' quality and sustainability standards. Implementing NTMs regulations by developed countries often focuses on sustainability issues and quality standards that are difficult for

developing countries like Indonesia to achieve (Oosterveer et al., 2014).

Sustainability is becoming an increasingly dominant issue in international relations. Developed countries use sustainability policies to demonstrate their commitment to controlling climate change while encouraging developing countries to adopt the same principles. In this context, products from South Sumatra, such as palm oil and rubber, must meet sustainability certification standards such as ISPO (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil) in order to remain competitive in the international market (Apriyanto et al., 2022; N. K. Hidayat et al., 2018). In international relations theory, economic diplomacy is a country's primary tool to strengthen its position in the international system. By meeting international standards, South Sumatra can increase the competitiveness of its products and expand export markets to countries with strict regulations, which not only increases competitiveness but also provides economic benefits for local communities (Eka Sintha et al., 2023; Maretna et al., 2021). This not only strengthens trade relations but also creates a positive perception of Indonesian products in the global market.

Multilateral cooperation, such as within the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) framework, is essential for member countries to adapt to changing international market standards. ASEAN serves as a forum for harmonizing regional regulations, which can reduce the burden on countries such as Indonesia in meeting international standards. For example, ASEAN actively achieves the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through South-South and Triangular



cooperation, which involves Southern countries and third parties to optimize the development agenda (Dinnata & Nuraeni, 2020; Suhandi, 2018). In addition, this cooperation also creates opportunities for member countries to collaborate on global challenges, including in trade and investment (Suhandi, 2018).

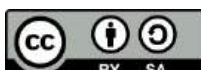
However, domestic challenges such as lack of infrastructure, access to technology, and farmer education are significant barriers to meeting international market standards. Indonesia often faces a dilemma between national policies and international commitments in this context. Developing countries often have to compromise between domestic needs and global demands, reflecting the complexity of international relations (Tekunan, 2014). Developing countries often struggle to balance domestic development and meeting international standards, leading to a mismatch between national policies and international market requirements.

Changing international market standards can also be seen as a geopolitical tool by developed countries to maintain their dominance in global trade. By setting high standards that are difficult for developing countries to meet, developed countries can maintain their position as major producers of high-quality products while limiting market access for other countries, as seen in sectors such as palm oil and other agricultural products (Nasution et al., 2022). High standards imposed by developed countries can limit developing countries' access to global markets, even if their products meet the highest quality standards.

### c. Local Government Strategy and Policy to Enhance Economic Cooperation

To overcome challenges and take advantage of existing opportunities, the South Sumatra regional government must formulate a clear policy strategy to enhance economic cooperation with ASEAN countries. Strategic steps need to be implemented to improve the quality and sustainability of export products from South Sumatra, requiring a comprehensive approach involving various parties, from the government to business actors to local communities.

One of the strategic steps that has been taken is strengthening infrastructure, which aims to support the export sector, especially in the agricultural and plantation sectors. The development and improvement of transportation infrastructure, such as roads, ports, and processing facilities, are significant in ensuring the smooth distribution of products to international markets (Sulistiyorini, 2021). The development of Tanjung Api-Api Port is an important example of a place where better infrastructure can facilitate the distribution of products to international markets. However, this project is constrained by limited funding, bureaucratic obstacles, and a lack of coordination between the central and regional governments. This slows down the realization of the port's potential as a primary link to strengthen trade connectivity with ASEAN. The revocation of the Tanjung Api-Api Special Economic Zone (KEK) status in January 2022 due to the failure to meet investment targets and delays in development illustrates the significant challenges in developing extensive infrastructure connecting Indonesia





to international markets (Laksono, 2022). Despite its great potential, this decision shows that infrastructure development requires better synergy between the central and regional governments and a more efficient resolution of bureaucratic and funding issues.

In addition, improving sustainability certification is very important to ensure that South Sumatran products can be accepted in the global market, which increasingly prioritizes environmentally friendly products. For palm oil, for example, certification such as ISPO (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil) can be the key to opening up international market (N. K. Hidayat et al., 2018). Export destination countries, especially those with strict regulations on product sustainability, such as European countries, prioritize products with this certification. Implementing this sustainability certification ensures higher product quality and enhances Indonesia's reputation as a producer that cares about the environment and social sustainability. In this case, ISPO-certified palm oil has a competitive advantage over products that do not have such certification because the international market prefers products that meet sustainability standards (Suroso et al., 2021). South Sumatra has made efforts to obtain ISPO (Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil) certification to meet international market standards, especially in countries that implement strict regulations regarding product sustainability. There are at least 82 companies that have ISPO certification in South Sumatra (Ditjenbun, 2024). However, adoption among smallholders is still limited. Research shows that smallholders often face obstacles in meeting strict certification requirements due to a lack of knowledge and resources. This reflects the challenges in policy

implementation that need to be further encouraged with education, training, and technical support to increase farmer awareness and capacity.

In the context of economic diplomacy and paradiplomacy theory, the efforts of the South Sumatra regional government can be seen as a step in strengthening the region's trade position through policies that support international market access. Economic diplomacy, which involves state and non-state actors in advancing national economic interests, can help South Sumatra establish better relations with ASEAN countries by reducing trade barriers within the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) framework. Implementing AFTA in this region provides benefits by reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers that can facilitate exporting products from South Sumatra, such as palm oil and rubber, to ASEAN countries' markets. However, the success of this cooperation is highly dependent on the ability of local business actors to take advantage of wider market access, which has so far been limited due to a lack of understanding of international trade procedures and applicable regulations.

In addition, the diversification of export products is an important strategy South Sumatra has tried. Developing agricultural sectors other than palm oil, such as coffee and cocoa, is a positive example, although expanding export markets is still limited. This diversification aims to reduce dependence on one commodity vulnerable to fluctuations in global market prices (A. Hidayat, 2023). However, to achieve success, there needs to be strengthening in the downstream sector, namely processing products with more added value. This is in line with the theory of





international relations, which emphasizes interdependence in cooperation between countries, where ASEAN members can share knowledge and technology to improve the quality of their products and their respective competitiveness (Mustofa & Choir, 2021). To achieve sustainability in production, modern agricultural technology has also been introduced in several regions to increase productivity and sustainability (Setkab, 2025). Advanced technologies, such as automated irrigation systems, drone crop monitoring, and data-based fertilization, can improve the efficiency and quality of agricultural products (Boutraa et al., 2011; Kalandarov et al., 2023). This technology not only helps increase production yields but also reduces negative impacts on the environment, such as deforestation and excessive use of pesticides. This environmentally friendly technology is also increasingly becoming a determining factor in international trade, where export destination countries increasingly prioritize products that meet quality standards and are environmentally friendly (Denisenko et al., 2021).

The South Sumatra regional government must be more proactive in formulating policies aligning with central policies while ensuring that these policies support the development of leading sectors with great potential in ASEAN economic cooperation (Abdul Gani & Taufiq A. Ra, 2021). International cooperation, especially with ASEAN countries, also plays an important role in increasing the competitiveness of South Sumatran products. Through ASEAN economic integration, as stated in the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), South Sumatra can take advantage of tariff reductions and trade

barriers to facilitate exports to neighboring countries. In addition, this collaboration opens up opportunities to share knowledge and technology that can improve the quality of local products. Research conducted by Hatta shows that partnerships within the ASEAN framework support regional economic integration and enable wider market access for member countries (Hatta, 2020). Therefore, strengthening relations with ASEAN countries can accelerate the process of increasing production capacity and product quality and open up greater market access for South Sumatra.

Although South Sumatra has taken strategic steps to increase economic cooperation and the competitiveness of its export products in the international market, its needs must be met. In South Sumatra's Opportunities to access the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), more coordinated strategic steps based on local strengths are essential. Strengthening economic relations with ASEAN countries within the AEC framework opens up great opportunities for South Sumatra to take advantage of tariff reductions and trade barriers and share knowledge and technology. To fully tap into this potential, South Sumatra must ensure that existing policies and infrastructure support better integration into the ASEAN economy, focusing on increasing production capacity, meeting international standards, and implementing more structured sustainability. South Sumatra's success in seizing this opportunity depends largely on its ability to strengthen synergies between the central and regional governments, the private sector, and the community. With more focused policies and strong support from all parties, South Sumatra can become a major



player in the ASEAN economy, increasing the competitiveness of local products and strengthening its position in the global market.

#### **IV. Conclusion and Recommendation**

This study reveals that the strategies and policies implemented by the South Sumatra Regional Government play an important role in strengthening economic cooperation with ASEAN countries. Leading economic sectors, such as palm oil, rubber, renewable energy, and trade infrastructure development, such as Tanjung Api-API Port, are the main pillars in supporting economic integration with ASEAN. Although these steps show great potential in expanding export markets and improving cross-country trade connectivity, the main challenge is the less-than-optimal coordination between the central and regional governments. Inconsistencies in policies and implementation between the two levels of government can slow down the development of leading sectors essential in increasing regional competitiveness.

In addition, developing skilled human resources (HR) with global competence is also a key factor in facing competition in the international market. Skills-based education and training programs following industry standards are critical in increasing the competitiveness of South Sumatra products, especially in the agriculture and plantation sectors. By collaborating with the private sector and educational institutions and strengthening the capacity of local business actors, South Sumatra can create a competent

workforce that is ready to compete in the global market.

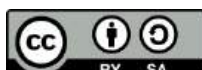
To achieve better economic integration with ASEAN, South Sumatra needs policies that focus on developing leading sectors, improving infrastructure, and developing human resources. With better coordination between the central and regional governments and more substantial support from the private sector and the community, South Sumatra can take advantage of existing opportunities to strengthen its economic position internationally and become a major player in the ASEAN economy.

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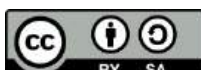


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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Globalization and Marginalized Groups: Finding Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Heavy Nala Estriani

*Department of International Relations, Faculty  
of Law and Social Political Sciences  
Universitas Mataram*  
[heavynestriani@unram.ac.id](mailto:heavynestriani@unram.ac.id)

Hasbi Asyidiqi

*Department of International Relations, Faculty  
of Law and Social Political Sciences  
Universitas Mataram*  
[hasbiasyidiqi@unram.ac.id](mailto:hasbiasyidiqi@unram.ac.id)

Nurul Qomaria

*Department of International Relations, Faculty  
of Social Political Sciences  
Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang*  
[nurullqomariaa28@gmail.com](mailto:nurullqomariaa28@gmail.com)

#### Abstract

Globalization does not automatically align with equitable growth and development. Its progress has often been exclusionary, as reflected in the growing number of marginalized groups overlooked by global development dynamics. Among these groups, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) remain particularly neglected, receiving limited support and attention from the international community. This causes IDPs to experience more social vulnerability, exclusion, and deprivation in various sectors. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has one of the largest IDP populations worldwide. Conflict and violence, and frequent natural disasters, have become the main reasons for displacement. This paper aims to discuss the most feasible durable solution to be implemented in handling prolonged displacement in the DRC. Using qualitative methods, this paper used the

concept of Internally Displaced Persons and also the concept of Durable Solutions in addressing these matters.

**Keywords:** *Globalization, Marginalized Group, Internally Displaced Persons, Durable Solutions*

#### I. Introduction

The development of globalization also contributes to increasing the growth of the human development index. However, these developments are not inclusive. One in three people worldwide is recorded to be in low growth. They are a marginalized group that generally experiences economic, social, and political deprivation. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are one of these marginalized groups. There are 75.9 million IDPs worldwide as of the end of 2023. 68.3 million are IDPs due to conflict and violence, while natural disasters cause another 7.7. Interestingly, out of a total of 6.9 new IDPs in 2023, one million of them are from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (IDMC, 2023).

The issue of IDPs as a marginalized group is increasingly interesting because although the number of IDPs is twice as large as the number of refugees and has a global scale, the issue of IDPs has received less attention from the international community. This situation increasingly hinders their ability to participate in and keep pace with the ongoing developments of globalization—particularly because globalization itself has yet to become inclusive or favorable toward marginalized groups, especially internally displaced persons (IDPs).

This paper then questions how globalisation affects the dynamics of the development of marginalised groups,



especially IDPs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This paper also examines the most feasible durable solutions to handling prolonged displacement in the DRCs. This paper argued that the development of globalisation has not been able to involve marginalised groups, such as IDPs in the DRC, in the dynamics of economic, political, and social development in their countries. Therefore, in order to reduce the extended displacement, long-term measures including repatriation, resettlement, and local integration are essential.

## II. Methods

This paper employed qualitative methods to explore the lived experiences and challenges faced by individuals categorized as internally displaced persons (IDPs) as part of marginalized groups. While not all marginalized groups are IDPs, IDPs often experience marginalization due to their displacement status. IDPs are therefore viewed as a particularly vulnerable subgroup among larger underprivileged populations, particularly in light of globalization, which reinforces and intensifies structural inequality. By applying the concept of internal displacement, marginalization and the durable solutions, the study aims to understand how durable solutions can be a feasible solution in handling protracted displacement and how the international community can accommodate these matters.

## III. Theoretical Framework

### *a. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)*

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Guiding Principles on Internally Displaced defined as:

“Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obligated to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border” (OCHA, 1998, p. 1).

United Nations Human Rights Commission Includes internally displaced persons as one of the lists of marginalized groups that suffer from deprivation of basic rights in many ways. (OHCHR, 2014). In this case, IDPs are different from the definition of refugees. This difference lies in the existence of IDPs who are still residing within the country where they live. Despite being included in marginalized groups, the position of IDPs is in some ways more difficult than that of refugees. IDPs do not receive as much attention as refugees. Very little information and documentation has been obtained regarding IDPs. Although UNHCR includes IDPs in its agenda, UNHCR's focus is more on refugees, and there is no UN agency specifically addressing the issue of IDPs (Seshadri, 2008). Marginalized groups are generally forgotten from the development agenda in the domestic and global scope. According to UNDP, although



the pattern of human development has increased from 1990 to 2015, one in three people worldwide is at a low level of human development. This further increases the level of vulnerability, widens the gap, and makes it difficult for marginalized groups to catch up as the world progresses (UNDP, 2017).

Francis M Daeng, who served as the first Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced, explained that IDPs have become a global crisis, with half of the total IDPs in the world being in Africa (Deng, 2001, p. 142). Attention to IDPs began to emerge in the 1990s, precisely when some observers of IDPs proposed establishing a set of rules that apply to handling IDPs. This was realized by completing the Guiding Principles on Internally Displaced in 1998. Although it is not legal and binding, the rule can be used as a reference in dealing with IDPs worldwide. Similarly, with the help of the UN, the Norwegian Refugee Council established an Internal Displacement Monitoring Center that comprehensively processes data related to IDPs (Seshadri, 2008, p. 38).

#### *b. Durable Solutions*

UNHCR has introduced the concept of a durable solution in response to the prolonged displacement of refugees and internally displaced people. The idea, introduced in the guiding principles of internal displacement 2004 (UNHCR, 2004), specifically states that internally displaced persons (IDPs) have the right to return voluntarily, in safety and dignity, to their place of origin, or to choose to settle elsewhere within the country. Second, the state bears the primary responsibility to assist IDPs in the processes of

return, reintegration, or local resettlement, and to ensure safe and adequate living conditions. Lastly, the state must facilitate the participation of IDPs in decision-making processes that affect their future, including in choosing durable solutions.

In various displacement situations, durable solutions are indeed regarded as long-term responses. There is no specific hierarchy in implementing durable solutions; rather, governments, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations can adopt the most feasible solution at a given time (IDMC, 2014). Suppose resettlement and integration are deemed the most feasible options. In that case, the relevant stakeholders—particularly the UN and other international organizations—must ensure that the resettlement and integration processes are carried out effectively to assist displaced persons in relocating and starting over in the place of their choosing.

### **IV. Findings and Discussions**

#### *a. Internally Displaced Persons and Social Exclusion*

The development of globalization has also facilitated the development of intra-state conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which has subsequently had an impact on the increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The DRC is currently listed as the country with the most significant number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in 2024, with more than 900,000 additional IDPs. Overall, the total number of IDPs in the DRC reached 6,800,000



people by the end of 2024 (UNHCR, 2024). This number covers more than 55 percent of the total population of the DRC. IDPs are generally spread across several regions in the Eastern DRC, where escalating communal conflicts are rampant, such as North Kivu, South Kivu, Katanga, Orientale, and Maniema (White, 2014, p. 5).

IDPs in the DRC generally leave their homes due to instability caused by communal conflicts. However, a humanitarian crisis will happen without any serious policy to deal with it (Rushing and Montandon, 2017). As in the DRC, prolonged conflicts have impacted the scarcity of staple foods caused by crop failures. This is due to the absence of human resources in conflict-affected agricultural sectors. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, as many as 7,7 people in the DRC experience food insecurity (FAO, 2017). Other humanitarian crises caused by the increase in IDPs include health problems such as cholera outbreaks, lack of education, and unsafe infrastructure of refugee shelters inhabited by IDPs.

As a country with one of the most significant humanitarian crises in the world, the United Nations stated that the condition of the humanitarian crisis in the DRC has entered level three, the highest level in humanitarian crisis issues. (United Nation, 2017). Reaching level three on the scale of the humanitarian crisis means that the problem of IDPs in the DRC can be equated with the humanitarian crises in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. IDPs in the DRC are described as having a vicious cycle of displacement because they generally experience displacement more than two or three times. IDPs in the DRC are categorised as

marginalised groups with problems such as homelessness, lack of food supply, disease outbreaks, sanitation problems, maternal and infant mortality rates, and so on. The number of IDPs in the DRC contributes to making the DRC one of the least developed countries by ranking 171 out of 193 countries and territories in the 2023 Human Development Index (UNDP, 2023).

The communal conflict that occurred in the DRC had an impact on the increase in the number of IDPs in the country. With the number covering 55 percent of the total population, this problem should not only be a domestic problem but also an international one. However, the issue of IDPs in DRC has not received much attention from the global community. As a marginalized group, it is clear that the concept of marginalization, in this case, is not related to the quantity or number of IDPs in the DRC. Marginal, in this case, is when the IDPs experience deprivation in various aspects and experience social exclusion. In this case, the vulnerability faced by IDPs is a factor that affects IDPs as a marginalized group.

In line with Haan, that vulnerability is the cause of an individual experiencing social exclusion. In the case of the DRC, the condition of insecurity as part of the vulnerability is a factor that increases the number of IDPs in the country. As a marginalized group, IDPs in the DRC are different from IDPs in other countries. They not only live in refugee camps but also live in a community in another area with a safer situation. However, this is sometimes unsafe because disputes with host families over a lack of food, water, and sanitation are more likely to occur, making them vulnerable





to new conflicts. This has an impact on IDPs, who also have to move from one place to another when the conditions at the location are no longer safe, and the availability of foodstuffs has run low (HRW, 2010, p. 35). Although internally displaced persons have the same rights as the rest of society, the reality is that they face much discrimination. The stigma of 'displaced' in social status indicates that they differ from the common society. Moreover, the political and economic conditions of the DRC are far from stable, making IDPs in the country further discriminated against in the global order. The condition of the IDPs is exacerbated by the role of the DRC government in not focusing its attention on the group. This is because the government is in a fragile condition with an unstable political situation. Poor economic conditions also complicate this (Veiga, 2011). The low economic growth cannot be separated from the loss of the role of 55 percent of the population, who have lost their right to contribute to increasing the country's economic growth.

In this regard, the social deprivation IDPs face in the DRC is related to De Haan's explanation (De Haan, 2000, p. 26) The deprivation of these basic rights cannot be separated from social exclusion, a multidimensional concept. Not only do IDPs lose their homes, jobs, property, and so on, but they also experience deprivation of various things at one time. This causes them to experience deprivation and exclusion in the economic, political, and social dimensions.

#### *b. Seeking for Durable Solution?*

Although the concept of durable solutions applies to various forms of forced migration—such as refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs)—global policies tend to focus more heavily on the durable solution for refugees. In contrast, IDPs often receive significantly less attention (Cakaj, 2017). Addressing the development and protection of IDPs has proven to be a particularly challenging issue. In many cases, resolving the situation of IDPs is even more complex than addressing refugee crises. This is largely because IDPs remain within the borders of their own country and are therefore legally under the responsibility of their national government. Consequently, international intervention in IDP situations is often constrained by concerns over national sovereignty, making external involvement more sensitive and limited in scope.

However, this issue should not serve as an obstacle for the international community to begin prioritizing policies related to IDPs, particularly when the situation reaches the level of a category three humanitarian crisis. For a solution at the top level, the UN, in this case, needs to pressure the DRC government to control the root of the existing problems, especially prolonged communal conflicts. In terms of IDP management, the role of the international community remains crucial. This involvement must go beyond short-term assistance and extend to long-term solutions. A long-term solution, such as identifying and supporting prospects for durable solutions, is urgently needed to ensure the protection and reintegration of IDPs in the DRC.



Related to the durable solutions, voluntary repatriation must not be the best option for the IDPs. As is known, once IDPs leave their place of residence, it will take them a long time to return to their place of origin. The resurgence of violence in their place of origin, along with the presence of active combatants in the area, are key reasons why many people are reluctant to return to their hometowns. Thus, IDPs generally stay in refugee camps annually or move from one camp to another. So, they choose whether to stay in the refugee camps, join the local community, or strengthen their community to develop their potential and ability to continue living like other normal people.

Second, international aid, especially from agencies like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), is closely linked to the resettlement of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). For instance, in 2023, IOM helped thousands of displaced households living in places like Mukuku, Kalenge, Cinquantenaire, Kalonda, and Kalunga gain access to long-term solutions. Many of these households had no safe and sustainable alternatives and were in imminent danger of being evicted. In response, IOM supported their voluntary relocation to safer and more stable areas by offering financial help as well as transportation.

In responding to the problem of IDPs, the UN facilitates assistance through several agencies such as UNHCR, UNOCHA, and so on. The UN also identifies the rules that must be carried out by the countries involved in

handling IDP cases based on guiding principles related to IDPs (Alobo and Obaji, 2016, p. 26). However, Lanjow in Haynes (Haynes, 20, p. 36) Criticized the handling of IDPs through external assistance, which has been more focused on short-term handling through the provision of cash assistance and limited food and medicine supplies, and does not last in the long term. Short-term humanitarian assistance is certainly needed, but if we look closely at the duration of the settlement of IDPs in refugee camps, handling by relying heavily on humanitarian assistance alone is not enough. In this regard, the United Nations, through its agencies, must emphasize long-term solutions such as local integration to push the self-sufficient of people in displacement (O'Brien, 2017). Self-sufficiency is important because it is certainly difficult for IDPs to survive in the local community without having the ability and capability to sustain their lives. Remaining in refugee camps for years without access to employment or skill development is not a sustainable solution, as it further marginalizes IDPs from the dynamics of global development and economic growth.

Another significant international effort in addressing the issue of IDPs is the establishment of the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 as a response to the increasing number of global humanitarian issues, specifically related to refugees and IDPs. The summit, which produced the paperwork called "Agenda for Humanity," heavily emphasized five core responsibilities that must be upheld in solving the prolonged displacement. The core commitment 2 specifically emphasizes major global commitment under the slogan "Leaving No One Behind," reinforcing the need



for inclusive humanitarian responses and long-term solutions by 2030.

“Commit to promote and support safe, dignified and durable solutions for internally displaced persons and refugees. Commit to doing so coherently and measurably through international, regional and national programs and by taking the necessary policy, legal and financial steps required for the specific contexts and in order to work towards a target of 50 percent reduction in internal displacement by 2030” (Agenda for Humanity, 2016, p. 7).

The document offers long-term, durable solutions to reduce the number of marginalised groups of IDPs, by finding political solutions to solve the root of the problem, developing legislation and government policies to integrate marginalized groups in the national development agenda, and including them in education programs, labor absorption, and national development plans. A notable point here is to disenchant the international communities that the sole problem of the IDPs is only by providing them with short-term assistance. In fact, if strong self-sufficiency and widespread independence are emphasized, IDPs can become valuable contributors to the economy. As mentioned in the fifth point of the document agenda:

“Ensure that humanitarian and development actors, local authorities, and private sector enterprises work collectively, across institutional divides and mandates and, in multi-year frameworks, to end aid dependency and promote the self-reliance of internally displaced populations” (Agenda for Humanity, 2016, p. 7).

The commitments contained in the Agenda for Humanity seem to show the seriousness of the international community in reducing the number of IDPs in the world. But the problem goes beyond just whether or not there is a basic framework in place to deal with the IDP issue. It also involves making sure that these documents are not only legitimate in theory but are also successfully applied in real-world situations. To make sure that the catchphrase "leaving no one behind" is not just a pipe dream, it is still very difficult to translate established rhetoric into tangible action.

## V. Conclusion

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are one of the parts of marginalized groups that receive less attention. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the country with the largest number of IDPs in the world. IDPs in the country have also been included in the third level of international humanitarian crisis. However, the handling of IDPs has not received great attention, especially from the international community. The social exclusivity received by IDPs in the DRC has made the group increasingly face deprivation in various sectors. Thus, durable solutions such as repatriation, resettlement and local integration are crucial to cut the prolonged displacement.

However, the main challenge is not only the presence of policy frameworks, but also, it relies on the implementation. Without real commitment and collaboration among actors and stakeholders, the policy documents will only be discourses without practical meaning. Therefore, realizing durable solutions is not only about moving IDPs from



one place to another, but about restoring their dignity, rights, and life opportunities so that they can contribute more to social and economic development.

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### **Narrative, Identity and Terrorism: A Constructivist Analysis of the Pahalgam 2025 Attack in the Escalating India–Pakistan Conflict**

Neola Hestu Prayogo

*Ph.D. Student of International Relations at  
Central China Normal University  
[neola.hp@gmail.com](mailto:neola.hp@gmail.com)*

Dewi Fortuna Sari

*Faculty of Social, Cultural, and Political  
Sciences, UPN "Veteran" Jawa Timur  
[dewifortuna.fisip@upnjatim.ac.id](mailto:dewifortuna.fisip@upnjatim.ac.id)*

#### *Abstract*

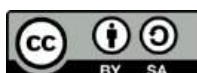
The terrorist assault on Pahalgam in 2025 signified a new chapter in the enduring conflict between India and Pakistan. This study analyses how the governments of both nations produced official narratives in reaction to the occurrence and how these narratives embody and promote their distinct national identities. The research used a constructivist method to examine the production of identity and meaning through political speeches, government pronouncements, and media framing. The analysis relies on qualitative interpretation of secondary sources, such as diplomatic briefings, ministerial speeches, and reports from esteemed foreign media sites. Evidence suggests that India characterized the assault as an instance of cross-border terrorism, supporting its self-perception as a secular and democratic nation under threat and justifying retaliatory measures. Pakistan, in response, dismissed the claims and sought to recast the episode as a contrived crisis intended to divert attention from Indian persecution in Kashmir, portraying itself as a victim rather than an aggressor. This study

illustrates that identity formation and story creation are essential strategies in perpetuating the competition between India and Pakistan, distinguishing this research from earlier studies mainly concentrating on strategic, legal, or security aspects. It contends that absent a shift in one state's perception and representation of the other, future crises will likely follow analogous discursive patterns.

**Keywords:** India–Pakistan conflict, constructivism, political narrative, national identity, Pahalgam

## **I. Introduction**

The territorial dispute over Kashmir persists as one of the most enduring and intricate conflicts in South Asia, involving two nuclear-capable nations: India and Pakistan. The conflict's origins may be traced to the 1947 Partition of British India, which bifurcated the subcontinent into two new nation-states: India, characterized by a Hindu majority, and Pakistan, distinguished by a Muslim majority. The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, with a primarily Muslim population governed by a Hindu Maharaja, became a focal point of contention due to its disputed accession to India. Notwithstanding numerous conflicts and persistent diplomatic initiatives, the region has continued to be fragmented and militarized, with both nations maintaining conflicting territorial claims (Nicolson, S., 2022). The importance of Kashmir is rooted in its demographics, geography, and its symbolic role in shaping the national identities of both India and Pakistan. According to the constructivist perspective, the conflict cannot be comprehensively understood solely through material interests, such as territory or resources; it must also account for the





ideational frameworks that influence state behaviour, including historical narratives, collective memory, and perceptions of legitimacy. Kashmir is a vital component of Pakistan's postcolonial identity as the "homeland of Muslims" and of India's identity as a secular, territorially undivided republic (Paul, 2005).

On April 22, 2025, an armed group assaulted visitors in the Baisaran Valley of Pahalgam, located in Indian-administered Kashmir. The assault resulted in the deaths of twenty-six individuals, twenty-five Indian nationals and one Nepalese citizen, making it one of the most lethal incidents in the region in the last twenty-five years (BBC News, 2025). Despite The Resistance Front (TRF) asserting responsibility, Indian officials attributed the attack to Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a jihadist organization based in Pakistan (Shri, 2025). India alleged that Pakistan is implicitly endorsing the attack, characterizing it as an element of a broader campaign of cross-border terrorism. Conversely, Pakistan dismissed the accusations and asserted that India was employing terrorism as a rhetorical device to divert global focus from human rights abuses in Kashmir (Reuters, 2025).

On the other hand, the Pakistani government firmly denied the accusations made by India. Pakistan stated that it was not involved at all in the terrorist group's attack, including providing any support or assistance. Pakistan called India's accusations baseless and aimed at leading international opinion on the issue of human rights violations and the increasing internal tensions in Indian-controlled Kashmir (Reuters, 2025). The tensions between the two countries have increased with their various responses. Both countries are involved in retaliatory actions on

various fronts. Starting from responding to each other's accusations through the media, taking aggressive policies, to being directly involved in military contact on the border. This tension has also sparked international concern about a broader escalation of the conflict, leading to a nuclear war. The United States has called on India and Pakistan to exercise restraint, amid growing international concern over a potential escalation between the two nuclear-armed states, each of which reportedly has about 200 warheads (Newsweek, 2025). The incident of the terrorist group's attack in Pahalgam has further tested the relationship between India and Pakistan in the context of the dispute over the Kashmir region. The tensions that have been built are not only by armed violence, but also by the competition for national identity, the construction of a narrative of terrorism, and the struggle for legitimacy over disputed territory that has never been truly resolved peacefully since 1947.

This perspective aligns with constructivist theories that perceive terrorism and identity as socially produced entities. The designation of groups as "terrorists" or "freedom fighters" is significantly influenced by the actor's positionality and political narrative. India frames its narrative to depict Kashmir as an essential component of its sovereign territory, imperilled by external aggression and extreme extremism. Conversely, Pakistan positions itself as a protector of Kashmiri Muslims against what it characterizes as Indian occupation and persecution. These conflicting narratives are not solely rhetorical; they influence governmental decisions, popular sentiment, and foreign diplomatic affiliations.

Constructivism emphasizes the impact of identity politics and national mythology on



interstate conduct. The securitization of Kashmir is based on perceived existential threats to national identity: for India, any surrender over Kashmir is viewed as a compromise of its secular national fabric; for Pakistan, it signifies a repudiation of the Islamic cause upon which the nation was established. Consequently, the 2025 Pahalgam incident should not be perceived merely as an act of violence, but rather as a reaffirmation of conflicting identities, exacerbating the established narratives of suffering and resistance on both sides. The persistent character of the Kashmir conflict highlights the significance of ideational and identity-based frameworks in comprehending international issues. Utilizing a constructivist perspective reveals that the India–Pakistan rivalry concerning Kashmir is sustained not merely by strategic calculations or material interests, but by a profound contest over meaning, memory, and legitimacy that perpetually evolves through discourse, perception, and mutual antagonism.

This study seeks to analyse the terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, on April 22, 2025, by investigating both the timeline of the event and the political and diplomatic reactions of India and Pakistan. This dissertation examines the fundamental research problem: How do India and Pakistan interpret and react to the Pahalgam terrorist incident with national identity and international discourse? The study examines how each state constructs the story of the incident within its borders and on the global stage and how these narratives reveal underlying ideational frameworks tied to national identity, historical memory, and strategic self-perception.

This study aims to contend that the India-Pakistan war over Kashmir, including violent events like the Pahalgam attack, cannot be comprehensively elucidated solely through material or strategic interests. This paper argues that, via a constructivist perspective, the reactions of both nations are profoundly influenced by constructed identities, intersubjective meanings, and symbolic representations of threat and legitimacy. The paper will examine the conflicting narratives, allegations, and diplomatic strategies that arose following the attack to illustrate how state behaviours are influenced by physical security concerns and their aspiration to maintain specific national identities and international standings. This study employs a constructivist theoretical framework to elucidate the dynamics of escalation and misunderstanding between India and Pakistan, concentrating on identity, perception, and the social production of danger. Constructivism underscores the significance of national identity, concepts, and intersubjective meanings in influencing state conduct (Shafique, 2011). This paper will contend that examining the narratives constructed by India and Pakistan in reaction to the Pahalgam incident yields essential insights into the persistent conflictual framework of their bilateral relations and the wider geopolitical rivalry over Kashmir.

## **II. Theoretical Framework: Constructivism**

Constructivism offers an alternative perspective to analyse the global political reality that realist and liberal perspectives currently dominate. In contrast to the realist and liberal perspectives that focus more on material and rational interests in driving state



behaviour, Constructivism focuses more on interactions, ideas, norms, and identities that develop in shaping international reality. (Wendt, 1999). In this context, identity denotes the shared comprehension within a state regarding “who we are” concerning others, which may be based on religion, historical experience, cultural narratives, or geopolitical self-perception (Wendt, 1999). India's identity as a democratic and secular state, characterized by a robust opposition to terrorism, stands in contrast to Pakistan's identity as a defender of Muslim communities, especially in Kashmir. These identities are dynamic, continuously produced and reproduced through political discourse, media narratives, and foreign policy actions. Perception involves the assessment of one state's intentions and legitimacy by another, informed by constructed identities. Narrative pertains to the storyline or framing states utilize domestically and internationally to justify their actions and bolster their self-image (Wendt, 1999). By examining these concepts, constructivism facilitates an analysis of the Pahalgam terror attack as not merely a security concern but also a discursive arena in which both India and Pakistan reinforced their national identities and rationalized their policies for both domestic and international audiences.

In India and Pakistan, the constructivist approach is very relevant to analyse this issue because the tension between the two countries has contained identity content since their inception. There are differences in national identity between the two countries, which have caused the two countries to continue to be at odds. Pakistan defines itself as a home for Muslims in South Asia. In contrast, India frames its national

identity as a secular country that is rich in multiethnicity, even though it is dominated by Hindu society (Nicolson, 2022). Pakistan narrates the formation of its country based on the Two-Nation Theory, namely, Muslims and Hindus in British India are two different nations in various aspects. They cannot be united peacefully (Shaikh, 2009). So Pakistan was formed as a home for Indian Muslims who were separated from India, which is predominantly Hindu. Based on the Two-Nation Theory, Pakistan calls Kashmir an inseparable part because the majority of Kashmiri society is Muslim. On the other hand, India views the integration of Kashmir as a legitimate part of the Indian Union since the signing of the Instrument of Accession (1947) (Khalid, 2011). For India, defending Kashmir is an effort to maintain their state identity as a secular power and maintain their legitimacy in the Kashmir region.

The construction of conflicting identities between the two countries has given rise to a perception of deep hostility. One party's actions will tend to arouse suspicion in the other party. A social structure marked by distrust will encourage countries in conflict to view their national interests in a zero-sum and conflictual manner (Wendt, 1994). This Constructivist approach will be used to analyse further how India and Pakistan frame the terrorist group's attack in Pahalgam in their official discourse. This study analyses the influence of identity and perception—key concepts in the constructivist framework—on the responses of India and Pakistan to the 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack. Alexander Wendt (1992) posits that the structure of international politics is socially constructed through shared ideas, rather than being solely dictated by material capabilities. The persistent mutual



distrust between India and Pakistan arises from historical conflicts, the construction of identities, and the repetition of narratives over time.

After the Pahalgam attack, Indian political discourse, encompassing official government statements and media coverage, characterized the incident as yet another example of “cross-border terrorism,” thereby reinforcing India’s enduring view of Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism. This perception is not merely reactive; it is integrated into a broader national identity narrative wherein India presents itself as a secular, democratic victim of Islamist extremism. Prime Ministerial statements underscored the necessity to “defend national sovereignty against foreign-backed militants,” while Indian diplomatic efforts sought to persuade international partners to intensify pressure on Pakistan (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2025).

In contrast, Pakistan refuted any involvement and redirected the discourse to India’s purported human rights abuses in Kashmir. This response illustrates Pakistan’s identity as a defender of Muslim communities, especially in the contested Kashmir region. Pakistani officials described India’s actions in Kashmir as indicative of a systematic pattern of repression and occupation, a narrative consistently employed to validate Pakistan’s international posture and domestic political standing. These rhetorical strategies indicate that Pakistan’s response was not solely defensive; instead, it actively sought to securitize India’s presence in Kashmir to garner support from the Islamic world and mitigate external pressure. The constructivist approach suggests that these actions are not solely strategic or interest-driven; instead, they are influenced by the ideational frameworks

through which both countries interpret and respond to violent events such as the Pahalgam attack. These frameworks are developed, replicated, and conveyed through political speeches, diplomatic discourse, and media narratives targeting domestic and international audiences. An analysis of identity-driven narratives reveals that responses to the Pahalgam incident are influenced by immediate political considerations, enduring national myths, and intersubjective meanings that shape the India–Pakistan relationship.

### III. Methodology and Data

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology, specifically employing critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the principal technique to investigate how India and Pakistan formulate and convey their official narratives concerning the Pahalgam terrorist incident. This interpretive method concentrates on how language via speeches, official announcements, and media framing generates meaning, mirrors power dynamics, and influences national identity, rather than examining causal linkages or gauging public opinion.

In order to identify the ideational components in the language utilized by state actors, particularly examining the deployment of terms such as “cross-border terrorism,” “retaliation,” and “oppression” to legitimize particular political stances or moral assertions. This method works particularly well for explaining how stories are constructed to define ‘self’ and ‘other’, often along identity-based lines. This research examines how India and Pakistan portray themselves as victims or defenders, the attribution of responsibility, and



the impact of these narratives on internal perception and international reputation.

Secondary documentation methods acquired this study's data, entailing the collecting and systematic analysis of documents chosen for their relevance, credibility, and representativeness on the narratives of the India–Pakistan conflict. This collection comprises official statements from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (including press releases from April to May 2025), transcripts of political speeches by leaders such as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, news articles from prominent international media outlets (e.g., Reuters, Al Jazeera, and BBC), along with peer-reviewed journal articles and academic commentaries pertinent to South Asian regional security and discourse analysis.

The selected sources employed purposive sampling to guarantee representation of government narratives and media interpretations, while preserving a balance among Indian, Pakistani, and worldwide viewpoints. Incorporating academic literature enhances triangulation and anchors the analysis within recognized theoretical frameworks. The data were examined utilizing a discourse analysis methodology, concentrating on constructing identity, legitimacy, and moral posture via political language. Focus was directed towards repeating terminology, metaphors, emotive framing, and the deliberate employment of narratives in the discourses of both India and Pakistan. This method enabled the study to transcend superficial description and to analyse how language operates as a mechanism of political influence and identity

formation in the context of the Pahalgam incident.

#### IV. Discussion

##### *a. India's Official Narrative*

India described the terrorist attack in Pahalgam as a manifestation of cross-border terrorism allegedly originating from Pakistan. In the hours following the attack, Indian government elites, such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Ministry of External Affairs Secretary Vikram Misri, issued firm statements accusing Pakistan-based groups of being behind the violence. Modi's declaration that India would "pursue the perpetrators to the ends of the earth" illustrates the use of emotionally charged and retributive language aimed at mobilizing national sentiment and reinforcing India's right to self-defence (Reuters, 2025). Similarly, Misri's assertion that the attackers were linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba and trained in Pakistan functions as a rhetorical strategy to externalize the threat and simplify the enemy image (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). However, no valid evidence supported this narrative (Shaikh, 2025).

Through this consistent narrative, India not only seeks to delegitimize Pakistan on the international stage but also constructs itself as a victim of terrorism, a nation under constant threat, yet morally justified in taking retaliatory measures. This aligns with a broader discursive strategy seen in past incidents such as the 2008 Mumbai attacks, where India also framed Pakistan as the sponsor of cross-border terrorism. What emerges is a deliberate effort to maintain continuity in a state-sponsored discourse that positions Pakistan as a "terror-exporting" state and India as the rightful actor





of moral resistance. From a discourse analysis perspective, these public statements serve more than just an informative function. However, they actively shape public perception, construct national identity in opposition to a threatening 'Other', and legitimize policy choices in the name of national security. The narrative becomes a performative act, not only responding to a security incident but also producing a political reality in which India reaffirms its victimhood and moral superiority.

After the terrorist attack in Pahalgam in April 2025, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave a speech strongly condemning the perpetrators and those who supported the attack. In his first public speech after the attack (April 24, 2025), Modi stated emphatically "I say to the whole world: India will identify, track and punish every terrorist and their backer" (Ellis-Petersen, 2025). The above statement shows Modi promising to pursue every terrorist and their backers to the end. Although Modi did not mention Pakistan directly in this sentence, the term "their backer" implicitly refers to Pakistan which India accuses of masterminding or sponsoring the terror attacks. Through this speech, Modi built a narrative that Pakistan was behind the terrorist attacks and therefore would be given a befitting response. He described Pakistan as a state that supports terrorism. A strong statement was also issued by the Secretary of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Vikram Misri, who accused the terrorist group of originating from Pakistan and receiving training from the Lashkar-e-Taiba group (India Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). Vikram Misri also viewed that the terrorist group's attack was aimed at creating conflict in Kashmir by attacking the tourism sector and triggering

communal conflict in India. Indian government elites believe that this terrorist attack was intended to instil fear among non-Muslims living in the Kashmir region.

Various official narratives issued by India remain consistent in building the perception among its people and the international community that the Resistance Front (TRF) group that claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack in Pahalgam is merely a front for Lashkar-e-Taiba based in Pakistan. This narrative built by India is an effort to strengthen the perception that Pakistan has a role in the attack incident. In various forums, India always emphasizes that Pakistan is a haven for cross-border terrorist groups that often carry out cross-border terror in India, especially in the Kashmir region. Several terrorist attacks that occurred in India, such as the Mumbai attacks in 2008, India accused Pakistan of sponsoring the attacks and providing protection to the perpetrators of cross-border terrorist attacks (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). India then framed the terrorist attack in Pahalgam to emphasize further the long-standing narrative that Pakistan is a country that supports various cross-border terrorist groups and India as a victim who has the right to take action to defend itself and retaliate against what India has received.

Real actions also followed the various narratives issued by India in response to the terrorist attacks. After the terrorist group attack incident in Pahalgam, India took a series of firm actions against Pakistan. The firm actions taken by India include:

- 1) One of the key diplomatic actions was the expulsion of several Pakistani defence attachés, declared *persona*





*non grata*. The MEA described them as “individuals whose continued presence would not be conducive to bilateral peace” (Times of India, 2025). The phrase “not conducive to peace” reflects the narrative construction of Pakistan not merely as a hostile neighbour but as a state actively undermining regional order, thereby justifying the downgrading of diplomatic ties. Simultaneously, India reduced its diplomatic personnel in Islamabad, a gesture that symbolically communicated its distrust and distancing.

- 2) India restricted interaction and access for Pakistani citizens by revoking visas for Pakistani citizens and closing the border between India and Pakistan. This step is a form of India's effort to limit the entry of Pakistani citizens into India who could potentially threaten India's domestic security. This was framed not just as a security precaution, but as an act of protecting the nation from “cross-border infiltration of radical elements” (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2025), reinforcing the constructed identity of India as a victim of terrorism rooted in external sources, specifically from Pakistan.
- 3) Another significant move was India's unilateral suspension of its commitments under the Indus Waters Treaty, an agreement in force since 1960. Indian officials claimed that “Pakistan has shown no willingness to engage in good-faith dialogue,” and that the treaty must be “revised in light of 21st-century geopolitical realities”

(Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). The rhetorical use of “geopolitical realities” implies that India's perception of Pakistan as a bad-faith actor extends beyond terrorism into environmental and economic cooperation, thus constructing a broader narrative of delegitimizing Pakistan's credibility as a treaty partner.

- 4) India also mobilized international support to condemn Pakistan for its involvement in the terrorist group attack in Pahalgam. The Indian foreign ministry is actively trying to lead international opinion and international organization forums, such as the UN, to acknowledge that there is strong involvement from Pakistan in the terrorist group's attacks. India also made this effort by encouraging the UN Security Council to issue a press statement on April 25, 2025, which contained condemnation of the terrorist group's attacks in Pahalgam and emphasized the need to punish the perpetrators, organizers, and sponsors of the terrorist action. India then claimed this press statement as a form of international support for India to take firm action against the sponsor of this terrorist action, namely, Pakistan.

Numerous official narratives disseminated by India are replete with attempts to rationalize its punitive measures against Pakistan. India contends that Pakistan's inability to implement definitive actions against the perpetrators of the Pahalgam incident exemplifies “*a reflection of continued denial and inaction*” (Indian Ministry of



External Affairs, 2025). In an official press briefing, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs declared: *"Notwithstanding the provision of substantial evidence, there has been no credible action taken by Pakistan against the terrorist infrastructure within its territory."* We have grounds to suspect that other attacks were being orchestrated, making it essential for India to engage in self-defence (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). Consequently, India conducted what it termed *"measured, precise, and proportionate airstrikes aimed at terrorist infrastructure along the Line of Control, with stringent directives to evade civilian regions"* (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). India's rhetorical framing legitimizes its preventive military actions and portrays it as a sensible, responsible state addressing an urgent threat, rather than an aggressor.

Overall, through the official narrative issued by India, it seeks to create the perception that the terrorist group attack carried out in Pahalgam was a terror attack supported by Pakistan. India positions itself as the victim who has the right to take retaliatory or preventive measures for the recurrence of terrorist attacks in Indian territory. India describes the terrorist group attack in Pahalgam as a serious threat to the sovereignty and security of their country and needs to take firm action against Pakistan. This narrative, built by India, also received strong support from the Indian people who were angry about the terrorist group attack in Pahalgam. Indirectly, the terrorist group attack in Pahalgam aroused the nationalist sentiment of the Indian people by supporting various firm steps taken by the Indian government against Pakistan. In a constructivist framework, India's response was influenced by the collective

identity that they were the victims of a terrorist group attack supported by Pakistan. This identity then encouraged India to issue various firm policies up to the option of military conflict against Pakistan.

#### *b. Pakistan's Official Narrative*

On the Pakistani side, the official narrative that was built tended to be more defensive and counter-accusatory. Pakistan denied all accusations from India that it supported the terrorist group responsible for the Pahalgam attack. In shaping domestic and international perceptions, Pakistan framed the incident as another example of a recurring pattern in which it is routinely blamed for every violent event that occurs in Kashmir. Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, in his official statement on April 26, 2025, described the Indian reaction as part of a *"perpetual blame game"* and emphasized that *"this endless cycle of accusation must be broken in the interest of regional peace"* (The Hindu, 2025). He also stated that Pakistan is *"willing to support a neutral, transparent, and internationally monitored investigation into the incident"* (Time of India, 2025). This official Pakistani narrative seeks to portray Pakistan as cooperative and open to scrutiny, while simultaneously suggesting that India is using the attack as a pretext for pursuing hidden political objectives and justifying aggressive policies against Pakistan.

Several high-ranking Pakistani officials have suspicions that the terrorist attack in Pahalgam was not carried out by a terrorist group based in Pakistan and was a covert effort by India. This narrative was later reinforced by an official statement delivered by Pakistani



Defence Minister, Khawaja Asif, in an interview with international news media that Pakistan suspects the terrorist attack in Pahalgam as a form of "false flag operation" or engineered by India to corner Pakistan (Al Jazeera, 2025). This controversial statement issued by Khawaja Asif reflects Pakistan's efforts to refute all narratives issued by India with counter-conspiracy theories. In addition, various domestic Pakistani Urdu-language media also reported that the terrorist attack in Pahalgam was very advantageous for India in terms of time and targets to pressure Pakistan. This gave rise to various conspiracy speculations within Pakistani society about the real motives of the terrorist attack in Pahalgam.

While India denied various accusations, Pakistan tried to take the high ground by offering investigative cooperation on this case. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said in the wake of the April 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack, "Pakistan is open to participating in any neutral, transparent and credible investigation" (McRae, 2025). He voiced Pakistan's willingness to cooperate with an impartial international probe into the incident. This effort is a form of Pakistan to reveal the truth and uphold justice. However, implementing this proposal again depends on India's willingness to conduct a neutral investigation with Pakistan. For Pakistan, this openness to a neutral investigation has two functions: First, to show confidence that Pakistan was not involved at all in the terrorist group attack in Pahalgam; Second, a diplomatic effort to show that if India is not willing and rejects this proposal, then there is something India is hiding. In addition to maintaining a defensive position, Pakistan also made counter-accusations against India. This counter-accusation was conveyed by Pakistan's

Interior Minister, Naqvi, that there was Indian involvement in terrorist activities in Pakistan. This statement refers to the long-standing allegations that India allegedly provided support to anti-Pakistan militant groups in the unrest in Balochistan (Dawn, 2025). From the various statements issued by the Prime Minister and the Interior Minister of Pakistan, it is clear that Pakistan is trying to show that the real perpetrator of terror is India and that Pakistan is the victim of India's actions.

In addition, Pakistan also showed readiness in facing various threats and aggressive policies from India. Responding to India's cancellation of the Indus Water Treaty, Shehbaz firmly stated that the Indus Water is a vital interest for Pakistan, and the flow of the Indus Water will be maintained by all means. This statement warned India that if there were any actions or efforts to cut off the flow of the Indus Water, it would be responded to with full force (Dawn, 2025). The various narratives that Pakistan has issued also provide clarity to the old narrative based on Pakistan's foreign policy to provide support for Kashmir to determine its destiny according to its aspirations, without pressure from external powers such as India. This effort is a form of returning the focus of the international world to what happened in Pahalgam, which was a result of a political dispute and not just a terrorist attack. What Pakistan is doing is a form of "narrative reframing", namely wanting to change the narrative that is developing in the international world that Pakistan supports the terrorist group's attacks in Pahalgam, but instead wants to show that what happened in Pahalgam was the result of injustice given by India to Kashmir which triggered various attacks by terrorist groups.



In summary, the various official narratives issued by Pakistan are as follows:

- 1) Firm rejection of various accusations made by India and offering a neutral investigation to India. This step is an attempt by Pakistan to test whether India can prove its accusations objectively.
- 2) Pakistan counter-accused India that the terrorist attack in Pahalgam was a kind of "false flag" to reverse Pakistan's position as if it were the victim of accusations from India.
- 3) Pakistan emphasized sovereignty rhetoric and military warfare over India's various threats to sovereignty. Pakistan will fully counter India's threats, such as the cancellation of the Indus Water Treaty or military attacks.
- 4) Pakistan is trying to overcome the narrative of the issue in Kashmir. Pakistan is trying to change the perception of the cause of the terrorist action as a result of the political dispute in Kashmir, which has not been resolved until now. This effort was made to encourage the international community to see the terrorist group's attack in Pahalgam holistically and to attract international sympathy from India.

From a constructivist perspective, Pakistan's response is shaped not merely by material interests but by its socially constructed national identity as a counter-power to India. This identity has been historically developed through prolonged rivalry since the 1947 partition, positioning Pakistan as both a geopolitical competitor and

the ideological guardian of Muslim communities, particularly in Kashmir. As such, Pakistan's rejection of India's narrative and its assertion of an alternative account are strategic acts and expressions of its need to reaffirm its role as an equal and opposing force to India in the regional order. The interaction pattern between Pakistan and India tends to be at odds. If India accuses Pakistan, then Pakistan tends to deny and accuse India back. On the other hand, the perception has long been formed that if there is a problem in Kashmir, then India will blame Pakistan. The Kashmir issue is the root cause of tension between Pakistan and India that has never been resolved until now. Various narratives of blaming each other carried out by Pakistan and India have given birth to a kind of "perpetual blame game". In facing various accusations made by India, of course, Pakistan will continue to reject them. If Pakistan accepts the accusation, it means that Pakistan confirms its country as a "terrorist country" that India wants to pin. Accepting India's accusations will have an impact on the bad image received by the international community, so Pakistan will always reject accusations from India and try to counter accuse as an effort to maintain the dignity of its country.

#### *c. Dynamics of Conflict Escalation After Terrorist Attack in Pahalgam*

The official narrative battle between India and Pakistan triggered a broader escalation of the conflict and worsened the security situation in both countries. This wider escalation of the conflict occurred several days after the terrorist attack, India and Pakistan began to engage in limited armed contact, both on land and in the air. On April 25-26, there was



armed contact between the Indian army and the Pakistani army along the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir (Reuters, 2025). The Pakistani army initially carried out this armed contact by providing small arms fire that was not directed and seemed provocative at several Pakistani military posts along the Pakistani border. This provocative action carried out by the Pakistani army was then responded to with similar fire by the Indian army. The armed contact between the two countries marked the end of the ceasefire since the February 2021 peace agreement. Each party blamed the other; India called the Pakistani fire part of military aggression, while Pakistan stated that the fire was a response to violations committed by India (Arun & Bashaarat, 2025).

This limited armed contact also contributed to political and diplomatic tensions between the two countries. After the terrorist attack in Pahalgam, India and Pakistan both implemented various confrontational political and diplomatic policies. On one occasion, Pakistan declared it would withdraw from the 1972 Simla Agreement. This agreement is important because it is the basis for resolving the Kashmir issue peacefully and bilaterally without involving other parties (Farzana, 2025). In addition, Pakistan also stated that it had closed its airspace to Indian flights, so this policy made flight costs from India even more expensive (Reuters, 2025). On the other hand, India also implemented various confrontational policies, such as not re-recognizing the Indus water treaty and closing the border with Pakistan. In addition, India also revoked all visas of Pakistani citizens in India. With the various confrontational policies that the two countries have implemented, relations between the two countries fell to their lowest point in years just a few days after the terrorists

in Pahalgam. Relations between the two countries are heating up not only at the state level but also at the societal level. National media in both countries are issuing various provocative news reports that have provoked anger in the people of both countries (The Hindu, 2025).

The escalation of this conflict then developed into a more massive military escalation when India launched coordinated airstrikes on several targets in Pakistan. This airstrike operation was codenamed "Operation Sindoor" to attack 9 locations claimed to be facilities and infrastructure owned by the terrorist group responsible for the attack in Pahalgam. India claimed that this airstrike was measured only targeting targets owned by terrorist groups identified as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. India stated that this Sindoor operation was India's right to defend itself as well as a pre-emptive step to prevent further attacks by terrorist groups (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). Pakistan condemned the airstrike carried out by India and called it open military aggression. The Pakistani Foreign Ministry called it a "blatant act of war," and Pakistan had the right to retaliate against this airstrike as a self-defence response (Reuters, 2025). The consequences of this Sindoor operation opened up a major military confrontation between the two countries. The Pakistani military launched a series of counterattacks into Indian territory by launching drone attacks and missile fire. The various military confrontations that occurred also resulted in civilian casualties on both sides. Both countries claimed that the military attacks that occurred in their countries resulted in civilian casualties.

Both sides were also involved in direct air combat. Various international media outlets





widely reported on the dogfight between the Indian and Pakistani air forces on May 7, 2025. Operation Sindoor successfully attacked various targets in Pakistan, but there was also a fierce air battle. There was a claim from Pakistan that this air battle managed to shoot down five Indian Air Force planes. Although the number of planes downed has not been confirmed because there is no independent confirmation for such a large number of planes, it is estimated that this is a form of propaganda from Pakistan (Al Jazeera, 2025). Meanwhile, India claims that all its pilots returned safely, and one plane had disappeared. The magnitude of the escalation of open military conflict that occurred around May 7-9, 2025, is considered the most significant escalation of military conflict between India and Pakistan since the 1999 Kargil War. Direct conflict between the two nuclear-powered countries quickly prompted the world to consider the possibility of a major war. With troops from both countries on full alert, the South Asian region was on the verge of a large-scale military confrontation for several days. Pressure from the international community is significant in resolving the heated situation between India and Pakistan and reducing the tension of the conflict between the two countries.

#### *d. Diplomatic Impact and International Response*

The international community stepped in to prevent an escalation of the conflict between India and Pakistan. The United States took the lead through greater diplomatic efforts. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio held telephone conversations with Indian Foreign Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in early May, urging

both sides to exercise restraint and de-escalate tensions to promote regional stability. The United States said both sides should seek a “responsible solution” and avoid further escalation. Secretary Rubio also urged other allies to convey similar messages to Delhi and Islamabad. Senior US officials expressed condolences and condemned the April 22 terror incident in their discussions with India, reaffirming US support for India’s efforts to combat terrorism (NDTV, 2025). US President Donald Trump formally condemned the Pahalgam attack as a “horrific” incident and pledged to stand with India. However, it is important to acknowledge that while the United States has strongly condemned terrorism in Kashmir, Washington has been careful to refrain from publicly rebuking Pakistan. Reuters reported that the Trump administration condemned the attack and expressed support for India, though it has refrained from criticizing Pakistan publicly. This illustrates the diplomatic balance that the US continues to see Pakistan as a partner, despite its diminished standing after the US exit from Afghanistan in 2021, and must maintain to avoid total marginalization (Reuters, 2025).

Other major powers have also been involved in diplomatic efforts. China, Pakistan’s long-standing ally, has urged “restraint” on both sides and has approved any measures to ease tensions. Beijing, which has strategic interests in the region, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that passes through Pakistan, is naturally wary of a full-scale conflict (Anadolu Agency, 2025). China has expressed disinterest in encouraging discussions, but its diplomatic engagement has given Pakistan leverage to assert its position. The UK and the European Union have made their positions clear: the EU issued a statement



"strongly condemning the horrific terrorist attack in Pahalgam" and urging India and Pakistan to refrain from such actions in the future. On May 10, 2025, G7 Foreign Ministers issued a joint communique expressing deep concern about the escalating tensions between India and Pakistan. They condemned the April 22 terror attacks and strongly urged both countries to exercise maximum restraint, as further military escalation poses significant threats to regional peace and security (Business Today, 2025). On May 9, neighbouring Singapore issued a statement advocating for a diplomatic resolution and warning against actions that could worsen the situation.

Multilateral forums were used to prevent the situation from escalating. The UN Security Council held a closed-door discussion on the "India-Pakistan Question" on May 5, 2025. The first informal UNSC meeting on the India-Pakistan issue in years was a sign of the seriousness of global concern (UN Security Council, 2025). The forum was expected to hear briefings from both sides and perhaps a third entity, such as the UN or a presiding state. The outcome was kept secret; however, it put moral pressure on both countries to refrain from overstepping the line. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which has often been outspoken on the Kashmir issue, condemned the Pahalgam incident and criticized "India's actions that have exacerbated the suffering of the Kashmiri people," in line with the OIC's pro-Pakistan position (Anadolu Agency, 2025). Islamabad used this to underscore its stance that the Muslim world supports Pakistan's narrative on Kashmir. The United States and its allies eventually reached an immediate ceasefire between India and Pakistan shortly after May

7. On or about May 10, 2025, the two countries tacitly agreed to a ceasefire. Reuters reported that Islamabad and New Delhi reached an immediate ceasefire through emergency diplomatic channels, ending a military standoff brewing. Britain and the US reportedly facilitated efforts to ensure both sides continued the ceasefire along the Line of Control and refrained from further provocative activities (Reuters, 2025).

During the war, Iran and other regional actors sent their foreign minister to Islamabad as part of their mediation efforts. The visit by the Iranian foreign minister was interpreted as an effort to promote a peaceful resolution and offer diplomatic assistance (Reuters, 2025). The presidents of both countries have apparently been approached by the governments of Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in an attempt to alleviate the situation, stating that they are interested in preserving regional stability and cultivating cordial ties with both sides. (Time, 2025). The Pahalgam 2025 dispute resulted in a significant deterioration in India-Pakistan relations, reviving the diplomatic deadlock. Formal communication channels between the two governments were effectively cut off during the crisis; even after its resolution, restoring the already inadequate status quo ante took considerable time. No bilateral dialogue has occurred, peace negotiations have stalled since 2015, and this incident has only worsened matters (Razdan, 2018). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized this stance, stating: "Terror and talk can't happen together. Terror and trade can't happen together" (Economic Times, 2025). Pakistan has said that India is avoiding talks on Kashmir by citing terrorism as a pretext. As Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar stated, "Pakistan wanted a



comprehensive dialogue on a range of issues including water, whereas India wanted to focus only on terrorism” (Shahzad, 2025). This stance has strengthened the diplomatic deadlock.

Many agreements and cooperation procedures have been compromised as a result. However, India’s reversible suspension of the Indus Water Treaty has set a dangerous precedent in bilateral relations between the two countries (New Desk, 2025). Experts warn that politicizing the water issue could worsen tensions, even recent claims of World Bank intervention to enforce the agreement. Similarly, Pakistan’s choice to suspend the Simla Agreement marks a significant diplomatic loss. The Simla Agreement was the basis for the post-1971 peace agreement, and its failure to do so could signal that Pakistan is once again internationalizing the Kashmir dispute (Ramachandran, 2025). This move concerns the West as it involves other important countries, such as China, in the conflict.

On the contrary, there have been modest positive outcomes regarding global recognition of the need to address fundamental challenges. Both India and Pakistan face reputational challenges: Pakistan’s credentials on terrorism are under scrutiny, while India’s Kashmir policy, particularly since the withdrawal of autonomy in 2019, has faced criticism for exacerbating tensions. Analysts note that both countries have limited leverage: India has not managed to completely “marginalize” Pakistan in the international arena, while Pakistan has struggled to convince the global community of its innocence due to its long-standing reputational issues. The crisis has created a unique dynamic in which each side seeks to influence the global narrative in its favour.

However, it is constrained by historical precedents that reduce the efficacy of that narrative.

Domestic diplomatic repercussions also emerged. Modi’s government in India experienced a significant surge in political support for its tough approach to terrorism. The construction of a “tough on Pakistan” narrative strengthened domestic nationalism and temporarily unified cross-party support, with Indian opposition leader Mallikarjun Kharge asserting that, despite the government’s failure to prevent the attacks, the opposition would remain united in supporting the government against external threats. The transitional government in Pakistan, approaching general elections, used the crisis to advocate national unity against the Indian threat, despite criticism from certain factions for its inadequate diplomatic management of the situation.

## V. Conclusion

The terrorist attack in Pahalgam in 2025 not only escalated long-standing tensions between India and Pakistan but also revealed how national identity plays a central role in shaping state narratives during a crisis. From a constructivist perspective, identity is not a fixed attribute but a socially constructed and continuously reproduced concept through discourse and interaction with “the other.” In this context, India and Pakistan interpreted and responded to the attack through narratives deeply rooted in their national identities and historical self-other constructions.

India characterized the Pahalgam attack as an instance of cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan. This narrative



solidifies its identity as a secular, democratic, and law-abiding state under threat from external invasion. The account legitimizes India's retaliatory measures, including military strikes and the diplomatic isolation of Pakistan, as acts of self-defence. Moreover, by highlighting the brutality of the assault and portraying itself as a victim, India aims to foster domestic cohesion and elicit international empathy, thereby reinforcing its identity as a responsible participant in the global fight against terrorism.

Conversely, Pakistan's narrative is influenced by its role as a protector of the Kashmiri Muslim community and a victim of Indian dominance. Pakistan unequivocally rejected any complicity in the attack and demanded an impartial international probe, seeking to assert its legitimacy and moral superiority. Concurrently, it characterized India's response as repressive and grounded in anti-Muslim prejudice, which corresponds with its overarching narrative of opposing Indian occupation in Kashmir. This dual strategy—denial of culpability and moral counteraccusation—demonstrates Pakistan's endeavour to establish an identity that is simultaneously defensive and ideologically valid.

The process of narrative production is not solely reactive but also purposeful. Both states employ selective interpretation, framing, and transmission of narratives that reinforce their national identities while concurrently delegitimizing the opposing entity. These narratives are disseminated via official declarations, diplomatic channels, and international forums, and they are crucial for how states pursue recognition, solidarity, and influence.

The Pahalgam attack illustrates a persistent discursive cycle in India–Pakistan relations: a crisis occurrence incites narrative intensification, driven by deep-seated perceptions and adversarial identities. International pressure may momentarily diminish tensions, although the fundamental narratives persist unaltered. As long as identity-based narratives are formed in antagonism to one another, subsequent crises will probably follow a comparable path. Constructivism offers a significant perspective for comprehending both the material reactions to terrorism and the ideational mechanisms that perpetuate lasting competition. Sustainable peace necessitates a reconfiguration of identity narratives through trust-building, intersocietal engagement, and a mutual readiness to reconceptualize the "other" beyond animosity.

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Behind the Seams: An Assemblage Analysis of Labor Exploitation in Cambodia and Vietnam's Garment Industries

Maxine Denise Q. Mababangloob  
Ateneo de Manila University

[maxine.mababangloob@student.ateneo.edu](mailto:maxine.mababangloob@student.ateneo.edu)

Chloe Heart B. Hizon  
Ateneo de Manila University  
[chloe.hizon@student.ateneo.edu](mailto:chloe.hizon@student.ateneo.edu)

Renee Patricia R. Perez  
Ateneo de Manila University  
[renee.perez@student.ateneo.edu](mailto:renee.perez@student.ateneo.edu)

Avielle Elize V. Dizon  
Ateneo de Manila University  
[avielle.dizon@student.ateneo.edu](mailto:avielle.dizon@student.ateneo.edu)

#### Abstract

This article examines how labor exploitation among garment workers in Cambodia and Vietnam arises from the interaction of legal governance, economic development strategies, and cultural belief systems. Despite contrasting political regimes, Cambodia's fragmented pluralism and Vietnam's centralized authoritarianism, both countries produce similar exploitative outcomes: weak enforcement of labor protections, constrained worker representation, and persistent precarity. Using a most different systems design supplemented by an assemblage approach, the study analyzes how export-oriented growth and integration into global supply chains exert downward pressure on wages and working conditions. It also explores how religious and ethical worldviews, such as karmic endurance in Cambodia's Theravāda Buddhism and moral restraint shaped by Mahāyāna Buddhism and Confucianism in Vietnam, inform how workers interpret,

endure, and sometimes symbolically resist their conditions. These belief systems function as informal mechanisms of governance, sustaining compliance where institutional safeguards fail. By deploying assemblage theory in a comparative analysis of Cambodia and Vietnam, this article challenges reductionist accounts of labor exploitation by presenting how it emerges through the contingent alignment of fragmented legal authority, transnational economic imperatives, and internalized moral frameworks.

**Keywords:** labor exploitation, labor governance, export-oriented development, moral frameworks, cultural belief systems

## I. Introduction

Cambodia and Vietnam, located in Southeast Asia's Indochinese Peninsula, are significant manufacturing hubs in the global garment supply chain. In Cambodia, the garment and footwear industries employ around 800,000 workers, where 90% of them are women. This represents around 10% of the national labor force (ASEAN, 2024). The garment sector generated nearly \$12 billion in 2024, accounting for 44.59% of Cambodia's total export revenue (Pisei, 2025). These underscore Cambodia's reliance on low-cost production as a driver of growth, enabled by investor incentives, duty-free access, and favorable trade agreements.

Vietnam is also a global manufacturing powerhouse driven by an export-oriented growth model under its one-party socialist system led by the Communist Party. Exports have accounted for over 90% of the country's GDP (Sreedharan, Kapoor, & Nguyen, 2018). By 2023, Vietnam had emerged as the third-



largest exporter of textiles and garments globally, generating over \$40 billion in export revenues each year (WTO, 2023). The industry provides jobs for roughly 2.7 million people and accounts for about 16% of Vietnam's total export revenue (VITAS, 2024).

Given the garment industry's structural importance in both countries, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of poor working conditions in the garment industry in Cambodia and Vietnam. Applying a most different systems design (Mills et al., 2010), the research explores how two countries with distinct political regimes and union frameworks produce similar outcomes for garment workers.

## II. Methods

The comparative analysis proceeds along three core dimensions: labor governance, economic development strategies, and cultural belief systems. These categories reflect the key assemblages that shape garment workers' lived conditions in each context. Labor governance includes the structure and enforcement of labor laws, union dynamics, and the role of state and non-state actors. Economic development considers export orientation, foreign investment regimes, and the pressures of global supply chains. Cultural belief systems refer to the moral and religious frameworks through which workers interpret and internalize their conditions. Together, these dimensions serve as the analytical backbone of the comparison, allowing the study to examine how structurally

different regimes assemble functionally similar outcomes of labor exploitation.

In applying the most different systems design, this study treats Cambodia and Vietnam as cases that diverge across key institutional and cultural variables yet converge in labor outcomes. Cambodia is characterized by fragmented labor governance, a proliferation of pluralistic but weak unions, and enforcement systems undermined by corruption and limited state capacity (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Vietnam, by contrast, operates under a centralized socialist regime with a single-party-controlled union structure and formal legal protections that are routinely circumvented through informal negotiation and bureaucratic discretion (Ngo, 2016; Hoang & Jones, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2020). Cultural logics also differ: Cambodian workers often draw on Theravāda Buddhist ideas of karmic suffering and moral endurance (Tomalin, 2007; Cassinerio, 2021), while Vietnamese workers navigate workplace hierarchies shaped by Mahāyāna Buddhist compassion and Confucian norms of harmony and restraint (Tran et al., 2020). Despite these differences, both cases exhibit similar patterns of wage suppression, precarious employment, gender-based harassment, and ineffective worker representation (Sreedharan et al., 2018; Hardefeldt & York, 2023). MDSD allows the study to trace how these shared outcomes arise not from identical systems, but from structurally distinct yet functionally convergent assemblages of governance, market forces, and moral worldviews.

While much of the existing scholarship on labor exploitation in Southeast Asia has focused on institutional weaknesses,



corporate malpractice, or trade liberalization, fewer studies have explored how cultural and religious worldviews shape worker compliance and resistance in everyday factory life. Even fewer apply a comparative lens that treats political divergence not as a barrier, but as a means of uncovering structural commonalities in exploitation. Analyses of Cambodia and Vietnam often remain siloed, overlooking how functionally similar labor outcomes emerge from dissimilar configurations of governance and belief. Moreover, the dominant frameworks tend to treat culture as a background variable rather than a constitutive force. To address these gaps, this study applies an assemblage approach, which understands social conditions as contingent formations produced through the interaction of heterogeneous elements (Delanda, 2016). Rather than attributing exploitation to any single cause, assemblage thinking enables a multidimensional understanding of how labor precarity is actively constructed and sustained through the alignment of fragmented labor governance, export-led economic pressures, and culturally embedded moral frameworks. In doing so, this article offers a new account of labor exploitation in Southeast Asia that takes seriously the co-constitution of global production, power, and culture.

### **III. Hands at Work, Laws at Rest: Politics and Labor Governance**

#### *a. Legal Foundations of Labor Policy*

Cambodia and Vietnam each possess formal labor regimes designed to safeguard garment workers. In Cambodia, the Constitution and 1997 Labor Law guarantee

equal pay, freedom of association, and protection against gender discrimination. The law also covers working hours, minimum wage, and leave entitlements, with a 2021 amendment introducing changes to shift schedules, holidays, and dispute processes. Vietnam's 2019 Labor Code similarly outlines employment contracts, occupational safety, and collective bargaining rights. It is supported by the 2018 Anti-Corruption Law and the ratification of ILO Convention 98. However, Vietnam's continued delay in ratifying Convention 87 reflects its reluctance to allow independent unionization.

#### *b. Enforcement Gaps*

Despite these legal protections, enforcement remains limited. In Cambodia, the labor inspectorate under the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training lacks institutional capacity and credibility. From 2009 to 2013, only 10 out of 295 violating factories were fined, and just 7 faced legal action (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Corruption further erodes enforcement. Inspectors admitted to receiving \$100–\$200 to hand over to superiors for favorable inspections. Factories officially labeled as compliant were often reported by workers to violate labor standards, including excessive overtime and contract abuse.

In Vietnam, anti-corruption laws have not translated into stronger enforcement. Bribery remains widespread in the garment sector (Nguyen et al., 2020), and employers are often compelled to negotiate informally with state agents. Legal safeguards on working conditions are frequently ignored (Sreedharan & Kapoor, 2018). Studies by Locke et al. (2007)





and Chan and Wang (2004) note that implementation is minimal, while Hoang and Jones (2012) found no functioning enforcement in the factories they examined. Although grievance mechanisms exist, they are often inaccessible or distrusted by workers.

In both settings, legal protections exist on paper but are selectively enforced as part of a broader regime of non-enforcement where compliance is managed through discretion, negotiation, and corruption rather than consistent legal application.

### *c. Trade Union Dynamics and Limitations*

The Union governance differs across the two cases, yet both restrict worker power. Cambodia's labor movement is pluralistic but fragmented, featuring independent federations such as the Textile and Garment Workers' Federation of Cambodia. However, proliferation has not led to consolidation. Many unions compete rather than coordinate, and some are co-opted by political elites (Young, 2021). Arnold and Shih (2010) argue that industrial relations in Cambodia were shaped by donor agendas rather than worker mobilization. The 1999 US-Cambodia Textile and Apparel Trade Agreement introduced a tripartite model modeled on Western standards, leading to what Bienias (2015) describes as economic unionism aligned more with elite political arrangements than grassroots demands.

The weakness of Cambodia's union landscape is not just structural, but also spatially uneven. Union presence remains inconsistent. Better Factories Cambodia (2014) reported that 29% of surveyed factories had no

unions. Those that do are frequently targeted by employers. Human Rights Watch (2015) documented over 35 cases of union busting since 2012, including the dismissal of recently elected union representatives and the systematic use of short-term contracts to undermine organizing efforts.

Vietnam prohibits independent unions entirely. The Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) monopolizes union activity and operates under the authority of the Communist Party. Though formally extensive, the VGCL lacks the autonomy to advocate for workers' interests. It is positioned more as an administrative body than a site of resistance. Many workers describe the VGCL as ineffective or indifferent (Ngo, 2016). While some turn to wildcat strikes, these actions remain risky and often invite surveillance or punishment.

Although Cambodia permits union pluralism and Vietnam maintains centralized control, both systems ultimately restrict worker agency. Rather than enabling genuine bargaining, union structures in both countries serve to contain unrest—through political co-optation and fragmentation in Cambodia, and state control in Vietnam.

### *d. Labor Governance Reform Beyond the State*

In response to enforcement failures, both states have relied on international and non-state actors to improve labor governance. In Cambodia, Better Factories Cambodia (BFC)—a joint initiative by the ILO and IFC—was launched in 2001 to monitor compliance and improve transparency. It has improved the country's profile among global buyers, but its effectiveness in addressing deeper issues is



contested. Hughes (2007) notes BFC prioritizes global benchmarks over local labor needs. Bienias (2015) observes that wage and overtime violations, as well as the use of subcontractors, are prevalent in the garment sector but remain largely unaddressed in public discourse and monitoring initiatives. Although she does not specify the reasons for this omission, such issues arguably pose a challenge to state and employer interests by revealing practices that circumvent formal regulation and complicate enforcement.

Vietnam's Better Work Vietnam (BWV), established in 2009, operates in over 500 factories. Its initiatives include Gender Equality and Returns (GEAR) and the Factory Ambassador Programme, both of which aim to build workplace capacity and improve safety and gender equity (Betterwork, 2023). While these programs have produced localized improvements—such as improved communication and reduced harassment—they remain limited in scope. They focus primarily on interpersonal dynamics and voluntary managerial reforms, rather than systemic issues such as wage violations, excessive overtime, or the misuse of short-term contracts. Moreover, BWV's reliance on cooperation with state agencies and its non-binding framework restrict its capacity to address violations that implicate broader political or institutional structures.

Both BFC and BWV reflect the limits of compliance-oriented reform models that rely on voluntary participation and state cooperation. While such programs can lead to localized improvements in factory conditions and managerial practices, they lack the institutional independence and enforcement

power needed to address deeper structural violations—such as wage theft, forced overtime, and union repression—that are often rooted in the broader political economy of labor governance.

#### **IV. Garments of Globalization: Economic Models and the Fast Fashion Industry**

##### *a. Global Supply Chains and Export-Oriented Development*

Cambodia and Vietnam occupy strategic positions in the global fast fashion supply chain. Their export-oriented economic models shape labor dynamics in distinct yet converging ways. In Cambodia, the garment sector is a primary destination for brands such as Adidas, H&M, UNIQLO, and Zara (SWITCH-Asia Programme, 2022), drawn by low wages, lenient regulation, and preferential trade arrangements. These conditions meet the demands of the fast fashion model, which prioritizes rapid design turnover, just-in-time production, and minimized costs (Miranda & Roldán, 2023). Factories are pressured to meet short lead times, respond to volatile market trends, and maximize output with minimal investment in labor protections.

Vietnam's garment sector followed a similar trajectory through the Đổi Mới (renovation) reforms of the late 1980s, which introduced export-led industrialization and encouraged foreign direct investment (FDI) via tax incentives, deregulation, and limited labor organization (Le, 2022). In 2018, FDI in Cambodia's garment and footwear industries surged by 90%, while Vietnam's export growth in garments and footwear reached 79% and



60%, respectively (Donker, 2021). This influx of capital has incentivized cost-cutting across both economies, resulting in what Donker terms “downward pressure on wages and working conditions” as states compete to attract mobile capital.

This convergence is visible in shared outcomes. Cambodia’s minimum wage, despite increases, covers only 36% of the estimated living wage, and over 53% of workers are on short-term contracts that let firms bypass obligations and hinder union activity (Donker, 2021). In Vietnam, 77% of factories exceed legal workweek caps, and wage compliance has dropped since 2011, even as FDI rises (Betterwork, 2019). These patterns reflect not incidental failures, but systemic consequences of FDI-driven development strategies that reward states for maintaining weak labor enforcement.

#### *b. Exploitative Production Practices and Informalization*

Fast fashion’s demand for speed and flexibility reinforces exploitative labor practices in both contexts. In Cambodia, forced overtime, short-term employment, and intimidation tactics are widespread, according to ASEAN (2025). To remain competitive, garment factories in Cambodia and Vietnam predominantly employ low-tech CMT models: approximately 60 % of Cambodian factories operate on cut-make-trim contracts (ASEAN, 2024). Similarly, over 65% of Vietnamese garment exports come from CMT operations, with many firms stuck in low-value production phases despite significant export growth (Linh, 2025). This reliance on labor-intensive processes and the avoidance of capital-

intensive automation is driven by buyer pressures, low wages, and a lack of industrial policy, which collectively limit deeper modernization and reinforce dependency in global supply chains. Vietnam’s system differs in form but not in effect. A significant share of garment production is subcontracted through multi-tiered networks, where primary export factories outsource work to smaller workshops—often informal, unregistered, or home-based units operating outside industrial zones (ILO, 2019). These subcontractors are typically engaged to absorb excess orders during peak production periods or to meet tight deadlines imposed by global buyers. Because they fall outside formal regulatory oversight, labor standards in these sites are rarely enforced, leaving workers vulnerable to low wages, unsafe conditions, and exclusion from union representation.

These spaces allow firms to meet fast fashion demands while distancing themselves from responsibility for labor abuses (Worker Rights Consortium, 2013). Informalization, in turn, exposes workers to occupational hazards—such as unsafe equipment, excessive hours, and lack of formal protections—that go largely unmonitored. These risks are intensified by the scattered nature of subcontracted sites, which are often located in residential neighborhoods or outside formal industrial zones (Human Rights Watch, 2015). This spatial dispersion isolates workers from one another and from formal unions or grievance mechanisms, fragmenting collective action and shielding employers from accountability.

In effect, Cambodia concentrates exploitation within formal factories while



Vietnam disperses it through informal networks. Both models achieve the same outcome: minimizing labor costs while externalizing accountability.

*c. Institutional Reinforcement and Global Governance Structures*

The exploitative dynamics of fast fashion are not driven solely by national policy choices but are reinforced by global institutions and trade regimes that promote export-led growth. In Cambodia, labor conditions have been shaped by the World Trade Organization's liberalization frameworks and the World Bank's structural adjustment programs, which prioritize trade liberalization and FDI over labor protection (Titievskaia et al., 2021; Arnold, 2013). The WTO's rejection of the social clause in 1996, which would have tied trade benefits to labor standards, exemplifies this orientation.

These frameworks have positioned Cambodia as a model for market-led development, despite persistent labor violations. The country's dependence on low-cost, high-volume production has become structurally entrenched, with minimal incentives for reform. Vietnam has similarly expanded market access through trade agreements like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). While these agreements include labor provisions, enforcement mechanisms remain weak and largely symbolic (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Vietnam's integration into global markets is further accelerated by WTO liberalization, which has facilitated rapid export growth

without binding commitments to labor rights. These international agreements enable countries to maintain competitive advantages by limiting wage increases, delaying union reform, and resisting meaningful oversight.

The result is an institutional architecture that not only enables but actively sustains exploitative production conditions. Global trade regimes and development institutions reward deregulation and minimal compliance, making labor exploitation a structural outcome of global capitalism—not an anomaly.

## **V. Culture & Compliance, Silence and the System: Cultural and Religious Framing**

*a. Cambodian Spiritual Beliefs and the Moralization of Suffering*

Cambodia is a predominantly Theravāda Buddhist country, with over 95% of the population adhering to the faith, making it a central force in shaping moral values and social behavior (The Association of Religion Data Archives, 2020). Theravāda Buddhist beliefs are seen in the daily life of Cambodian citizens and thus play a central role in shaping how garment workers interpret and respond to the realities of labor exploitation. Rather than viewing suffering solely through a material or legal lens, many workers draw from a spiritual framework in which hardship is rationalized as a karmic consequence. According to Tomalin (2007), Buddhist ethics encourage individuals to “live patiently with a situation.” In this context, submission to difficult conditions is not only a product of external coercion for it is also culturally and



spiritually internalized as virtuous. Cassinerio (2021) notes that garment workers in Cambodia often focus on interpersonal mistreatment, such as verbal abuse or favoritism, rather than linking their experiences to broader structural injustice. This moral framing, grounded in expectations of respect and fairness, presents a cultural preference for dignity through endurance rather than confrontation. These values are further reinforced by management, creating a convergence between religious morality and labor governance.

Yet, it would be faulty to conclude that Cambodian cosmology and Buddhism only bring about submission. In moments of acute tension, particularly when foreign owners violate spiritual boundaries, mass fainting episodes have emerged as culturally intelligible acts of protest. These events, documented by Eisenbruch (2018), are understood by workers and local communities as forms of spirit possession triggered by moral and ritual disorder. Factories constructed on former Khmer Rouge killing fields or sites where guardian spirits are believed to reside often experience mass faintings following labor disputes or workplace accidents. These episodes are not dismissed as medical phenomena but interpreted as spiritual expressions of outrage. In one case, a spirit-channelled through a possessed worker—verbally chastised a factory owner and demanded ritual offerings to restore harmony (Eisenbruch, 2018). These fainting episodes present a clash between local spiritual sovereignty and global capitalist incursion. While they do not conform to conventional forms of labor resistance, they nonetheless function as symbolic denunciations of

exploitation, introducing a form of protest grounded in Khmer moral cosmology. As Eisenbruch (2018) observes, these events become “culturally coherent forms of social protest,” especially when institutional recourse is unattainable.

#### *b. Cultural Ethics of Restraint in Vietnam and the Politics of Silence*

In Vietnam, the internalization of labor exploitation is shaped by overlapping frameworks of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics and Confucian social hierarchies, both of which emphasize social harmony, moral self-restraint, and deference to authority. Although Vietnam's religious landscape is pluralistic, Mahāyāna Buddhism remains a cultural reference point that informs how suffering and obligation are interpreted. Unlike the karmic individualism in Cambodia's Theravāda tradition, Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhism highlights compassion and interdependence, particularly through the ideal of the bodhisattva, to delay personal liberation to alleviate the suffering of others (Tomalin, 2007). This moral orientation overlaps with Confucian ideals that prioritize social order, filial piety, and the avoidance of public conflict. As Tran et al. (2020) note, Vietnamese workplace culture often demands that workers suppress grievances to maintain interpersonal harmony, and employees are taught to value the collective good and family reputation over individual well-being. Speaking out in the factory hierarchy risks disrupting moral order and bringing shame to oneself and one's kin. Here arises a culture of silence, where endurance becomes an ethical imperative. Moreover, political repression intensifies this culture of silence even more as the





Vietnamese government enforces strict control over labor organizing, permitting only the state-run VGCL to operate legally. This creates a dual mechanism: cultural norms discourage protest, while state policies enforce compliance through the threat of punishment. Mahāyāna Buddhism's emphasis on non-confrontation and duty provides a framework through which hardship is moralized. Labor suffering is not only tolerated but rendered intelligible within dominant ethical systems, turning cultural compliance into a mechanism of governance.

Though both countries share global garment supply chains, they differ in how labor suffering is internalized, endured, and at times, ritualized. Cultural and religious norms in Cambodia and Vietnam function not as passive traditions but as moral infrastructures that regulate behavior, absorb grievance, and delimit the boundaries of resistance. Attending to these moral frameworks reveals how power is not only imposed from above but also sustained through the everyday moral reasoning of workers themselves.

## **VI. Linked by Thread, Divided by Borders: Shared Exploitation in Cambodia and Vietnam's Garment Industries**

### *a. Forced Labor Practices*

Exploitative labor practices remain widespread across Cambodia and Vietnam. Child labor persists in Cambodia's construction and garment sectors, with children involved in hazardous tasks (Field, 2017). In Vietnam, trafficked minors as young as twelve have been found working in unregulated factories

supplying global brands (Worker Rights Consortium, 2013).

For adult workers, forced and excessive labor is routine. In Cambodia, refusing overtime can result in wage cuts or contract termination (Kashyap, 2015). In Vietnam, workers are threatened with dismissal or financial penalties for absenteeism, even when related to illness, or for failing to meet strict quotas (Sreedharan et al., 2018). These coercive measures ensure labor compliance through economic dependency and fear.

However, these outcomes do not arise from a single point of failure. Rather, they result from the alignment of state indifference, corporate incentives, cultural norms, and economic precarity. In Vietnam, legal ambiguity and top-down union control intersect with Confucian expectations of harmony and restraint, reinforcing a workplace culture where resistance is both structurally and morally discouraged. In Cambodia, the absence of strong enforcement mechanisms combines with karmic narratives that moralize suffering, leading workers to rationalize coercion as part of their spiritual path. These dynamics illustrate a system where labor compliance is produced through the entanglement of bureaucratic, economic, and cultural forms of power.

### *b. Unsafe and Hazardous Work Environments*

Workers in both countries endure extreme heat, poor ventilation, and unsafe factory conditions. Cambodian factory temperatures frequently reach 40°C, prompting worker demands for cooling



interventions (Thorn, 2024, as cited in Nimol, 2024; Sreydeth & Sothyroth, 2024). Meanwhile, Vietnam faces worsening wet-bulb heat conditions, particularly in major industrial zones such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi (Not For Sale, 2024).

Factory layouts often pose direct safety risks. In Cambodia, workers report fears of entrapment or assault in isolated areas (Human Rights Watch, 2015). In Vietnam, over a quarter of factories have blocked emergency exits, presenting life-threatening dangers in crises (Worker Rights Consortium, 2013). These hazardous environments manifest most visibly through mass fainting incidents. In Cambodia, faintings are frequent, linked to toxic fumes, excessive heat, and psychological stress (Maza, 2017; Kamazu & Kim, 2019). In Vietnam, such incidents are less frequent but have occurred in extreme heat, such as the Quang Nam case where 66 workers collapsed (Thuy, 2016). The persistence of unsafe conditions reveals how health risks are normalized within production regimes that prioritize output over well-being. In Cambodia, fainting episodes are not only physiological responses to stress but also socially intelligible protests framed through local cosmologies, especially when they occur near spiritually significant sites (Eisenbruch, 2018). In both countries, physical and symbolic dimensions of labor risk are reinforced by state disengagement and moral expectations of endurance, producing compliance without direct coercion.

### *c. Gender-Based Discrimination and Harassment*

Women and LGBTQI workers experience widespread abuse across both garment sectors. In Cambodia, many workers have reported experiencing or witnessing physical and verbal harassment without access to protection mechanisms (Lawreniuk & Parsons, 2017). In Vietnam, nearly half of surveyed female workers experienced at least one incident of violence or harassment in the previous year (Hodal, 2019).

Pregnant workers face systemic discrimination in both contexts. Cambodian factories frequently refuse to hire or renew contracts for visibly pregnant women, often subjecting them to harassment or unreasonable workloads (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Vietnamese factories circumvent maternity protections by assigning women to short-term contracts, and denying them leave and benefits (Worker Rights Consortium, 2013).

Gendered exploitation is sustained not only through weak enforcement and employer misconduct but also through deeply embedded narratives of duty and sacrifice. Global production models value pliant, feminized labor, while local moral frameworks—whether rooted in filial piety or Buddhist ideals of endurance—discourage defiance. These intersecting pressures render gender-based violence systemic and overlooked, tolerated within a moral economy of labor shaped by state silence and corporate cost-cutting.



*d. Job Insecurity and Economic Instability*

Mass layoffs and factory closures have intensified job insecurity in Cambodia and Vietnam. In Cambodia, over 20,000 garment workers have been displaced (Hardefelt & York, 2023), while Vietnam experienced the loss of nearly 280,000 garment jobs in just five months, many without adequate compensation (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2023). Despite rising living costs, wages remain stagnant in both countries. Cambodian workers report declining real wages with minimal increases since 2020 (ILO, 2018; Hardefelt & York, 2023). In Vietnam, 99% of workers earn less than the Asia Floor Wage, even when working overtime (Oxfam, 2022).

These conditions drive workers into debt cycles. In Cambodia, 91% of surveyed workers hold loans—often informal, high-interest, or sourced directly from employers (Hardefelt & York, 2023). Vietnamese migrant workers commonly face steep recruitment fees, leading to debt bondage within global supply chains (Business & Human Rights Centre, 2025). Insecurity is not a side effect but a deliberate feature of the system. The state's permissiveness toward informal finance, the absence of labor protections, and the global race to lower production costs all converge to offload risk onto workers. The normalization of financial precarity is further entrenched by cultural expectations of resilience and familial responsibility, making unstable livelihoods appear natural—even inevitable.

*e. The Cross Stitch of Exploitation*

Despite notable differences in governance structures and cultural traditions, Cambodia and Vietnam converge across four core dimensions of labor exploitation: gender-based harassment, unsafe working environments, coercive labor practices, and deepening economic precarity. These outcomes are not coincidental or parallel; rather, they are produced through the interplay of institutional silences, global production pressures, and culturally embedded expectations.

In Cambodia, subcontracting arrangements and religious interpretations of suffering reinforce compliance without overt coercion. In Vietnam, centralized labor control is legitimized by Confucian ideals that privilege social harmony and discourage open dissent. Although these may appear as divergent cultural logics, in practice they facilitate structurally similar outcomes. State disengagement, often rationalized through local moral codes, is further compounded by the ability of transnational capital to exploit both regulatory gaps and normative deference. Consequently, what emerges is not an absence of governance, but a calibrated system of containment. Workers conform not only out of fear or economic necessity, but because institutional design, cultural rationalization, and market dependency operate in tandem to constrain collective resistance. Predictability benefits multinational brands. Political stability is secured for state actors. Yet the costs are disproportionately borne by workers.



Furthermore, policy responses that treat legal reform, cultural education, or market oversight as isolated solutions risk misdiagnosing the issue. Cultural frameworks are not inert; they are strategically mobilized to rationalize inaction. Legal mechanisms are not simply underdeveloped; they are selectively enforced in ways that preserve elite and corporate interests. Similarly, global brands are not passive beneficiaries—they are active participants in structuring conditions under which exploitation is both normalized and obscured.

## VII. Conclusion

This study examined how Cambodia's fragmented pluralism and Vietnam's centralized authoritarianism produce similarly exploitative conditions for garment workers. Using an assemblage framework, it demonstrated that labor exploitation does not stem from a single factor but emerges through the interaction of weak enforcement, economic dependency, cultural norms, and transnational pressures within global supply chains.

Despite distinct political systems, both countries converge on labor governance models that prioritize capital while limiting worker agency. Cambodia's union pluralism is weakened by elite capture and donor influence. Vietnam's state-controlled VGCL inhibits independent collective action. Enforcement differs in form, with corruption prevalent in Cambodia and informal negotiation dominating in Vietnam, but both reflect a model of governance through non-enforcement. Legal protections exist but

remain selectively applied, managing labor rather than protecting it.

Economically, both states have adopted export-led strategies that treat labor as a cost rather than a development partner. Cambodia's dependence on foreign-owned factories and Vietnam's subcontracting networks reflect how low-cost labor becomes institutionalized as a market advantage. Labor clauses in trade agreements like CPTPP and EVFTA remain largely symbolic in practice. Culturally, moral worldviews help rationalize exploitation. In Cambodia, Theravāda Buddhism promotes endurance through karmic belief, while in Vietnam, Mahāyāna ethics and Confucian values emphasize harmony and restraint. These beliefs function as informal mechanisms of discipline, reinforcing compliance in the absence of institutional redress. Labor exploitation thus arises from a convergence of legal, economic, and cultural assemblages. The assemblage approach captures this complexity, showing how inequality is simultaneously structured and internalized.

Future research should center the lived experiences of workers, exploring how they navigate and resist these forces. It should also examine whether global interventions genuinely challenge these structures or merely rebrand exploitation. Achieving real change requires not only national reform but a fundamental transformation of the global economic system that makes labor exploitation enduringly profitable.



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## Book Reviews

***Dictators and Their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence.* By Sheena Chestnut Greitens. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781316505311**

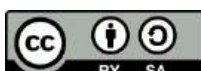
This book examines the use of coercive institutions by authoritarian regimes, focusing on two key questions related to the application of coercion within an autocratic regime. Those two key questions are: What determines the design of autocratic coercive institutions, and why do different autocrats design the institutions differently? Also, what effect does the institutional design have on the patterns of repression and the use of violence against civilians? There seemed to be nothing new about these questions, as literature on the relations between authoritarian regimes and the use of violence is numerous. Nonetheless, this book presents novel findings using an unconventional independent variable: a coercive dilemma. According to the author, a coercive dilemma is a tradeoff between political control and coercive power, where autocrats must empower security forces enough to enforce order and defense while controlling the power not used against them.

Coercive institutions are a dictator's final defense in pursuit of political survival and his chief obstacle. This book argues that autocrats face a coercive dilemma: whether to organize their internal security apparatus to protect against a coup or to deal with the threat of popular unrest. Because coup-proofing calls for (1) fragmented and socially exclusive organizations while (2) protecting against popular unrest demands unitary and inclusive ones, autocrats cannot simultaneously maximize their defenses

against both threats. Coercive institutions creation and management are the regime's urgent priorities as they fundamentally shape patterns of repression and state violence.

As a result, this dilemma has consequences for citizens, creating a fragmented and socially exclusive coercive organization, which is best suited to avoid a coup, versus a unitary and inclusive organization, which is best suited to prevent widespread unrest. The author argues that these two consequences could not happen simultaneously. This use of the coercive dilemma is refreshing in explaining the drive behind autocrats' design of coercive institutions. More interestingly, the consequences of this dilemma are exclusive from one another. Although exclusive, the author does not mention whether the consequences can follow one another. The central hypothesis of this book is that fragmentation and exclusivity are increasing the levels of state violence through two pathways: the incentives for violence and the intelligence capacity. Regimes whose coercive institutions are internally fragmented and socially exclusive are more likely to engage in violence.

Originally written as the author's doctoral dissertation, this book straightforwardly presents its content. Divided into four parts, this book presents a comparative study of various regimes in East Asia, using them as case studies. The first part is the theoretical framework. The author argues that autocratic regimes are primarily concerned with the risk of a coup, which can create a fragmented and exclusive organization. At the same time, widespread unrest creates a unitary and inclusive



organization. The second part describes variations of the coercive institutions. A more fragmented and socially exclusive organization is likely to be more violent because fragmentation and exclusivity damage the institution's capacity to collect and effectively analyze intelligence and create professional and social incentives to engage in a higher level of violence. By contrast, regimes that are concerned about widespread threats use less violence because of their intelligence capacity and incentives that favor limiting violence rather than increasing it.

The third part is the case studies. Both the second part and the third part are organized as comparative studies of Taiwan, the Philippines, and South Korea. The case of Taiwan concerns the regimes of Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo. In this case, both regimes transitioned from fragmented to unified and inclusive repression in the early 1950s, leading to a marked decline in violence. For the case of the Philippines, under the Ferdinand Marcos regime, it can be seen that there are forces that deliberately fragment coercive institutions to make them exclusive, fueling intensified repression throughout the martial law period of 1972 to 1986. In the last case of South Korea under the Park Chung-Hee and Chun Doo-Hwan regimes, it can be seen that Park's institutions are elite-centered and fragmented, thus creating regional and inter-agency violence. During Chun's era, institutions were more integrated, thereby reducing indiscriminate repression.

Lastly, the fourth part is the conclusion, where the author attempts to apply the same argument to other autocratic regimes. In Chile, a deal struck by the junta in the mid-1970s reduced Pinochet's elite threat,

leading to the consolidation of the coercive apparatus and a decline in state violence. In East Germany, the unexpected outbreak of mass unrest in 1953 made that the dominant perceived threat, spurring remarkable growth in the power and reach of the Stasi, the quintessential unitary and inclusive organization, and reducing state violence against East Germans in favor of the surveillance-based style of repression for which the Stasi has become infamous. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's paranoia about a coup led him to create fragmented and competitive security agencies staffed exclusively by family members, which were collectively responsible for extraordinarily high levels of state violence during his rule.

With its deep analysis, the overall theme of this book is considered a significant contribution to the study of authoritarian regimes and their use of coercive institutions. This book provides a powerful institutional lens for understanding when and why autocratic leaders employ brutal repression as a means of controlling their population. While additional factors, such as legitimacy, elites, and external forces, are portrayed as complex variables added to the intricacy of the deployment of coercive institutions, the coercive institution itself remains foundational in linking institutional structure to violence.

**Maria Indira Aryani**

International Doctoral Program of Asia Pacific Studies, National Chengchi University, Taiwan  
Email: [indira.aryani@gmail.com](mailto:indira.aryani@gmail.com)





## Book Reviews

***China's Cultural Diplomacy in Indonesia: The Case of a Transnational Singing Contest.* By Chang-Yau Hoon and Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2024. ISBN: 9789815203257**

Diplomatic relations between countries can be conducted in various ways, one of which is through the field of culture. This book attempts to illustrate how Xi Jinping strives to create a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" so that China's soft power approach can align and facilitate cultural exchanges with partner countries and connections between societies, especially with Indonesian society as part of bilateral relationship management. Xi Jinping proposed this grand strategy under the name "telling China's story well."

As an effort to establish bilateral relations, this book explains that the form of investment flow from China to Indonesia has resulted in an increase in the number of people learning Mandarin and a heightened public response to Chinese cultural identity. Through the Chinese community in Indonesia, China seeks to build an imaginary transnational community through various activities such as the Chinese singing competition "Indonesia Spring Festival" and "Spring Festival Melody," which is a music festival in China. As a warmly welcomed instrument of soft power, these various programs have only succeeded in reaching the Chinese community, which is a transnational community in Indonesia.

This book shows how China utilizes soft power strategies through cultural initiatives such as the BRI and GCI to build cross-country connections, including with Indonesia, in order

to strengthen its global image and counter Western narratives. These efforts are carried out through coordinated cultural diplomacy, including academic exchanges, global media broadcasting, singing competitions, and cultural activities that highlight China's identity and heritage. However, despite these programs being well-received, the book critiques their impact, which remains limited to the Chinese community and has not yet fully reached Indonesian society inclusively.

This book attempts to depict the dynamics of Indonesia-China relations as a long journey filled with tension, transformation, and reconciliation, reflecting changes in the domestic and international political context that influence the direction of Indonesia's foreign policy. During the New Order era under President Suharto, diplomatic relations with China were severed due to strong anti-communist and anti-Chinese sentiments rooted in the aftermath of the G30S event, making China a symbol of ideological threat. However, since the Reformation of 1998, especially during the leadership of President Abdurrahman Wahid until Joko Widodo, bilateral relations began to be restored and experienced significant improvement. This book emphasizes that this change in attitude is not only marked by the restoration of Chinese ethnic rights but also through strategic transformations that make China a key partner in national infrastructure and economic development (e.g., Jakarta-Bandung high-speed train, new capital in Kalimantan).

This book attempts to explain that although the Indonesia-China relationship has significantly improved, especially in the economic field during President Jokowi's administration, it remains colored by deep-



seated tensions and distrust among the Indonesian elite (e.g., concerns over economic dependence, the influx of foreign labor, and security issues in the South China Sea). This distrust is reinforced by the persistent anti-China narrative (e.g., sentiments of nationalism, Islamism, and social inequality). These sentiments are used by conservative groups to bolster anti-China rhetoric. This book emphasizes that the success of China's public diplomacy in Indonesia heavily depends on its ability to understand and respond to the complex history of bilateral relations and the continuously evolving socio-political dynamics of Indonesia.

Next, there is a chapter that discusses China's soft power in Indonesia post-Suharto: the case of the transnational spring festival celebration. Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, the treatment of the Chinese Ethnic group in Indonesia has undergone drastic changes, starting with the restoration of the status of Chinese organizations in Indonesia. On the other hand, China has also experienced a revival in the economic field, striving to establish good relations with other countries, one of which is Indonesia, which shares the same geographical location in Southeast Asia.

This book discusses China's cultural diplomacy strategy through the organization of the Chunwan (Spring Festival Gala) and the "Spring Melody Cup" singing contest in Indonesia. The Lunar New Year is positioned as a political instrument by the Chinese Communist Party to strengthen national solidarity and disseminate the Chinese national narrative, including to the diaspora community. The Chunwan event, broadcast by CCTV since 1983, is interpreted as a form of soft power that showcases narratives of nationalism, family unity, and glorification

of the "Motherland." However, the dominant Han-centric approach and the tendency to appropriate other cultures have become major concerns. This is also evident in the Guangxi Gala, which is now spreading to Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia.

In the conclusion chapter, it is revealed that diplomacy between China and Indonesia in the cultural field is often neglected because it focuses on the economic aspect. In addition, Chang-Yau Hoon and Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia also attempt to correct the view that portrays the partner country (in this case, Indonesia) as a passive and powerless party in establishing relations with China, merely "following" what China has planned, such as gala events, singing contests, and other forms of diplomacy. On the contrary, Chang-Yau Hoon and Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia argue that Indonesia also has interests, strategies, and an active role in shaping the direction of the bilateral cultural relationship. This book sharply reveals the complex dimensions of China's cultural diplomacy, particularly in the context of organizing the Transnational Spring Festival Gala and singing contests as instruments of soft power.

**Agnes Tresia Silalahi**

Department of Tourism

UPN "Veteran" Jawa Timur, Indonesia

Email: [agnes.tresia.fisip@upnjatim.ac.id](mailto:agnes.tresia.fisip@upnjatim.ac.id)



