



Asserting civic space of micro religious minorities: Evidence from Indonesia

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Abstract

Studies on religious discrimination have focused on the nature, causes, and dynamics of repression, asserting that perceived threats and cross-cutting influences of religious ideology and rational calculation are predictors for governmental discrimination against religious minorities. Yet, research on how the dynamic interplay of repression and pushback shapes the contestation between governments and minorities is lacking. This article explores this issue with a case study of a small indigenous religion group in culturally heterogeneous Indonesia. Building on civic space theory, this article argues for the importance of coping strategies in resisting state-led discrimination and asserting civic space. This article carefully examined complex micro dynamics while also offering new insights to better understand the interplay between repression and pushback in the context of religious freedom.

KEYWORDS

civic space, indigenous religion, Indonesia, religious discrimination, repression

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly since 2007, civic space has been shrinking all over the world. Although the trend has been affecting many aspects of civil liberties, recent studies found that one of the most affected by this shrinking is religious freedom, which particularly targets minority groups (Pew Research Center, 2019; The ARDA, 2020). Global observation on the 771 religious minorities in 183 states illuminates many ways in which religious minorities are discriminated against; its members are subjected to intimidation and religious mobilization, some have experienced

forced faith conversion, its religious expression is responded with constant suspicion and actively countered by the state and nonstate actors and, in some cases, its figures often criminalized and prosecuted under blasphemy laws for following or proliferating perceived “deviant teachings” (Fox, 2020).

In Indonesia, the trend is also rising albeit democratization in the post-Suharto era. In terms of religious freedom, the space for minority groups has been limited due to legal impositions of the state on religion (Colbran, 2010; Hurriyah, 2020; Lindsey & Pausacker, 2016; Marshall, 2018; Ropi, 2017). One study showed that although all religious minorities experience moderate to high levels of state-led discrimination, three religious minorities experience the most significant levels of discrimination not applied to other groups: Ahmadiyya, Shia, and the Animists—religious beliefs that are distinct from the organized religions and usually practiced by small and indigenous communities (Fox, 2020, pp. 109, 115–116). Despite making up <1% of the population, these micro-sized groups have been subjected to state-led discrimination, religious mobilization, harassment, and even forced conversion (Burhani, 2014; Chiara, 2014; Hasanuddin & Lakonawa, 2018; Khusna, 2020; Soedirgo, 2020; Swazey, 2017).

Among other groups, followers of Sunda Wiwitan, one of the countless indigenous faiths in Indonesia, have also experienced the brunt of discrimination. This group has survived colonial oppression and purges of nonofficial religions by the authoritarian New Order regime (The Jakarta Post, 2018). Even in the democratization era, their religious expressions are still met with governmental restrictions and religious mobilization. In addition, their effort to obtain state recognition as the indigenous community has been strongly rejected by the local government (Hurriyah, 2022; Hurriyah et al., 2020). Despite facing relentless discrimination, this group remains resilient. According to one study, the cause of this group's resilience is attributed to its success in managing its unrecognized legal status by utilizing a “back and forth” conversion tactic as the pragmatic response when dealing with repression by religious orthodoxy or the state (Mutaqin, 2014). Nowadays, this group is recognized as one of the most salient indigenous communities and widely known for its advocacy works and pushbacks. Although the length of repression and survival of this group has received much attention from the media and scholars (Ayocirebon.com, 2019; Kompas.com, 2020; Hidayat & Masturina, 2017; Qodim, 2017; Tendi, 2015; Wiardi, 2017), few have analyzed how this group manages to push back against state-led discrimination.

What accounts for the survival and resilience of this group? I argue for their ability to adopt coping strategies for survival and pushback. Although there are various and diverse coping strategies, ranging from resisting, adapting, desisting, and disbanding, I argue that resistance and adaptation play an important role in helping the group's survival and resilience. I also argue that these strategies have greatly impacted the way this community strives for survival, even though they may not always yield the desired effects. I develop my argument using civic space theory to explain the dynamic interplay of repression and pushback between the government and religious minorities. By studying the Indonesian case, this article offers insights into the resilience of micro-religious minorities under repression. The analysis of a single case study not only allows for more careful documentation of complex dynamics at the meso- and micro- level (Soedirgo, 2020, p. 8), but also particularly useful for theory testing and modification (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The findings of this article rely on data from qualitative research combining in-depth interviews, direct observation, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with key actors from various categories such as government officials, local politicians, religious leaders, civil society activists, leaders and followers of Sunda Wiwitan, as well as individuals and groups complicit in



mobilizing against the Sunda Wiwitan community. The field research was carried out in Jakarta and Kuningan, nonconsecutively in 2020, 2021, and 2022, covering a total of 82 informants. Some of the insights for the article are gained from reviewing works of literature and recorded events documented by various mass media. These insights are used in the first section, which briefly discusses the literature review and theoretical framework for the case study. Despite the literature arguing that Sunda Wiwitan has been subjected to various and significant levels of discrimination, my findings, discussed in more detail below, show that the Sunda Wiwitan group in Cigugur not only survives discrimination but instead, they can ignite resistance and collective pushbacks against state-led discrimination. This article ends with a call for future work to evaluate the contribution of coping strategies to groups' resilience and collect more rigorous evidence regarding the resilience of religious minorities.

GOVERNMENTAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST RELIGIOUS MINORITIES: ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

Scholars have long studied religious discrimination. Although this issue has been approached through different lenses, most studies focus on seeking explanations for the nature and causes of governmental discrimination against religious minorities. In the mainstream literature, three explanations have dominated the discourse of religious discrimination: first, scholars who looked to the state as the primary determinant of religious discrimination; second, those who emphasized the role of religious groups in shaping state policies and discrimination, and third, studies that highlighted the intertwining relationship between state and nonstate actors in promoting government religious-based discrimination.

Most studies on the first approach have underlined the importance of internal characteristics of the state as well as regime types as the predictor for governmental discrimination (Akbaba & Fox, 2011; Finke & Harris, 2011; Grim & Finke, 2011; Midlarsky, 1998). Some studies, however, have proposed possible explanations for various states' motivations to restrict religious freedom and discriminate against minorities (Finke & Martin, 2014; Huntington, 1996; Koesel, 2014). Although explanations are varied from one to another, the main argument of this approach emphasizes the state as the primary determinant of discrimination. This approach is also found in a large number of Indonesian studies on religious politics and discrimination (Fahrudin, 2019; Hasan, 2017; Ropi, 2017; Setara Institute, 2018; Wahid 2020), asserting that the state becomes the main actor of religious politics and discrimination in terms of how it maintains its relations and alliance with religious communities, as well as how it adopts particular religious symbols or values (Dagg, 2001; Hefner, 2018; Lindsey & Butt, 2016; Ropi, 2017).

In contrast, studies of the second approach focused on the ability of societal actors in shaping religious-based policies and governmental discrimination against religious minorities. In this approach, religious groups are viewed as the main actors in shaping or responding to state policies. For instance, some studies find a correlation between the perspective, role, and strong influence of religious organizations and cartels on government policy on religion (Finke & Stark, 2005; Grzymała-Busse, 2015; Stark & Finke, 2000) and religion-based social regulations (Richardson, 2004). Other examples are also found in Indonesian literature, where some studies have analyzed how Muslims in Indonesia have negotiated their religious values and identity vis-à-vis the "secular" state ideology to influence the state system and policies (Hamayotsu, 2011, 2013; Ropi, 2017; Suaedy, 2011).



Apart from these two dominant approaches, the recent debate on the study of religion and politics highlighted the intertwining relationship between state and non-state actors in promoting religious policies and discrimination against minorities. Drawing on the rational choice theory on religion, these studies argued that governmental regulation frequently serves as a proxy for competition and religious monopolies, which involved both political actors and religious groups (Iannaccone et al., 1997; Stark & Finke, 2000). According to these studies, the connection between political and religious actors in promoting government religious-based discrimination was more influenced by their rational calculation rather than religious ideology, although they also recognized the interconnectedness of both factors in shaping the actors' attitudes. While religious actors seek to get the government more involved in supporting religion and discriminating against nonofficial religions for ideological purposes, politicians seek to support a religious monopoly in return for political legitimacy, even with the costs of repressing minority religions (Fox, 2018).

Although I am not discounting the importance of these approaches in explaining how and why governments engage with discrimination against religious minorities, they are not sufficient to illuminate the groups' responses and pushback against discrimination. On the other hand, there is a growing body of research that has discussed various ways that allowed minority groups to survive amidst repression. Examples of this can be found in the case studies of cultural groups or religious communities in Muslim-majority countries like those in the Middle East or Indonesia (Bell, 2018; Elsass, 1995; Ismail, 2015; Kondo, 2021; Lamoreaux, 2016; Qodim, 2017; Rosyid, 2022; Wakamatsu, 2021; Wiardi, 2017). However, much of the discussion focuses on various survival strategies that have enabled minority groups to endure repression while retaining their values and identities. For instance, some minorities managed to seek social acceptance by integrating and assimilating with the majority groups, while others chose self-alienation or setting up group boundaries to preserve their values and identities and remain surviving under repression. However, few have analyzed how and why some religious minorities remain resilient and capable of resisting repression. In so doing, this article employs the analytical framework of the civic space theory to scrutinize the way a microgroup engages with coping strategies as well, as to better understand about survival and resistance of religious minorities. Civic space theory, while unique to the study of religious discrimination, is popularly used to describe dynamics between restrictions and responses in the domains of democracy, human rights, and civil society (Bossuyt & Ronceray, 2020; Buyse, 2018; Carothers, 2016; Vértés et al., 2021; Youngs, 2019). By reframing the dynamic interplay of repression and pushback with civic space theory, this article explores new explanations for the survival and resilience of minority groups while also filling in the gaps in the studies of governmental discrimination.

REFRAMING INTERPLAY OF REPRESSION AND PUSHBACK WITH CIVIC SPACE THEORY

Although there is no single definition of civic space, many scholars refer it to an arena in which citizens and civil society can organize themselves and freely express their views, to defending their interests, values, and identities, as well as claim their rights and influence policy-making (Bossuyt & Ronceray, 2020; CIVICUS, 2021). In the mainstream literature, discussion of civic space is often used to explain dynamics between state restrictions and responses of civil society to defend their space, hence said, civil society space (Buyse, 2018, p. 968). Few, however, have



examined civic space by looking at other dimensions, such as freedom and participation of citizens (Malena, 2015; Nguyen, 2017) or other elements in the notion of civil society, including community groups, collective actions, or social movements (Daniere & Douglas, 2012). Borrowing from this concept, I expand the definition of civic space as “a public arena in which citizens, collectives, and societal groups can access their fundamental freedom and basic rights without state restrictions.” By this definition, this article views religious freedom and the religious group as part of the arena and actors within civic space.

Civic space theory begins with the assumption that state and civil society are continually competing over civic space. Given this, civic space can be challenged or threatened in different ways and by different actors, including state and nonstate actors. On one side, the state may threaten this space by imposing government measures or restrictions using a diverse range of actions—some public, others hidden; some formal, others informal; some declamatory, others administrative. They can also challenge civic space by attempting to delegitimize or exert arbitrary control over groups or organizations they perceive as threats or as competitors (Buyse, 2018; Hayes et al., 2017). The governments may also fail to correct or stop non-state actors, such as private sectors, conservative civil society, or illiberal political actors (Youngs, 2019), which do not respect human rights (Bossuyt & Ronceray, 2020). When pressure comes from nonstate actors, civic space also depends on the degree to which the state condones (or even encourages) that pressure or actively counters it to protect civil society (Buyse, 2018). Similar to methods of restrictions of civic space, the state may threaten the religious freedom of minority groups by imposing government measures, policies, and actions: ranging from restrictions to all religious groups, to favoring certain religions or religious groups, or targeting certain religious minorities for governmental discriminations (Finke, 2017; Grim & Finke, 2006, 2011; Mataic & Finke, 2019). In practice, governmental religious-based discriminations can manifest in four main patterns: (1) restriction on religious practices, (2) restriction on religious institutions and clergy, (3) restriction on conversion and proselytizing, and (4) other types of restrictions, ranging from discriminatory laws and policies to state surveillance of religious groups and state's negligence to protect religious minorities (Fox, 2020).

On the other side, the practical capacity for citizens and civil society to respond to state restrictions method is also important to defend their civic space. This is because the civic space consists of and is determined by three factors (Buyse, 2018, p. 969). The first is existing institutional channels, including laws and procedures and the possibilities for contestation they offer. In this regard, the state and civil society may compete in using legal means and mechanisms: with the state employing administrative and criminal law to suppress the work of civil society and citizens; and the citizens or civil society taking legal actions to advocate themselves. Second, discourse and the power to label and frame, by which the state uses derogatory terminology aims to deter criticism, discourage free expression, increase negative public opinion, and justify the repression; and the civil society responds with counter-narratives. Lastly, the capacity of civil society to maintain and create new space is also important in determining the civic space. This includes the capacity to respond to pressures from state or non-state actors, as well as to exert coping strategies and pushback against state pressures. In so doing, there are at least four following options in which citizens, collectives, community groups, and civil society may respond to state restrictions with coping strategies (CIVICUS, 2021). First is the resistance strategy, which encompasses a variety of actions and approaches to push back against the state's methods of repression. Second, the adaptation strategy, which includes less confrontational advocacy, engaging more at the local level, and



building alliances with peers or other groups to exchange information and coordinate responses to repression. Third, the desisting strategy, which entails moving away from contentious work areas to less contentious ones or moving from work at the center of government to work at the local level altogether. Fourth, the disbanding strategy, in which civil society operates out of the public eye under closed space, in response to repression.

As the case of Sunda Wiwitan suggests, the use of these coping strategies plays an important part in shaping their ability to defend their civic space while also significantly influencing the chance of their survival. Although I argue that the most prominent strategies which helped the group's resilience are resistance and adaptation strategies. As this paper aims to scrutinize the complex micro dynamics of the micro-sized religious group in Indonesia, the civic space theory provides a better framework for grasping this issue and reorienting our understanding of the contestation between governments and minority groups in the civic space for religious freedom. In Table 1, I illustrate the use of civic space theory as a theoretical modification to reframe the dynamic interplay of repression and pushbacks in the case of religious freedom of minority groups.

IDENTITY FORMATION OF SUNDA WIWITAN AMIDST NEVER-ENDING DISCRIMINATION

The Sunda Wiwitan is one of the many indigenous religions in Indonesia. Yet, unlike most indigenous faiths that have been practiced since the time of the archipelagic kingdoms, the existence of the Sunda Wiwitan religious community is relatively new. They were formed in 1848 in the small village of Cigugur in Kuningan, West Java (Figure 1), when a local aristocrat and clerics namely Madrais began to spread his teachings—later known as Madraism. This religious community, however, differs from typical indigenous religion groups like Parmalim in North Sumatra, Marapu in East Nusa Tenggara, and Tolotang in South Sulawesi, to name a few. While most indigenous religions combine a blend of animism, dynamism, and pantheism (Danandjaja & Koentjaraningrat, 1970), the Madraism shared more similarities with syncretic teachings such as Kejawen and Sumarah in Central Java, which combine a blend of Islam and Javanese mysticism (Stange, 1980, 2009). Although in the case of Madraism, some studies refer to the Madrais teaching as a blend of nationality values in Javanese and Sundanese spiritual tradition (Komarudin, 2017), or a combination of the elements of Islamic values and early Sundanese culture (Qodim, 2017; Rosidin, 2000; Syukur & Qodim, 2017). Due to its unique characteristics of teaching and history formation, scholars refer to the Sunda Wiwitan in different terms, including local religion (Hurriyah, 2022; Ismail, 2015; Muttaqin, 2013), indigenous religion (Maarif, 2017; Rosidin, 2000; Swazey, 2017), religious group/sect (Aripudin, 2020; Qodim, 2017; Waluyajati, 2017), and even religious-sectarian and ethno-nationalist group, asserting that it is a new type of religious-based movement combining the elements of syncretism and nationalism (Kartodirdjo, 1973; Komarudin, 2017).

Since its formation, this community has already faced the brunt of governmental and societal discrimination in almost all aspects of religious freedom, from being denied recognition to experiencing religious mobilization and forced disbandment. I argue that the main reason was because of the history of formation and the group's identity of the Sunda Wiwitan. Rather than being a religious group, this community was formed by Madrais based on his reflection upon Dutch colonialization that has brought cruelty on a vast scale to the life of many residents in West Java. This is also what caused Madrais to invite his followers to carry out a rebellion

TABLE 1 Author's modification of civic space theory.

Actors	Resistance strategies	Adaptation strategies	Desisting strategies	Disbanding strategies
<i>How does civil society respond to restrictions?</i>	efforts to create a more enabling environment by working on international norms; coalition building or shaping public opinion; countering negative narratives against CSO work; mobilising support to strengthen legitimacy.	to help local actors to adapt/survive by investing in CSO security, constituency building, local philanthropy; respond in a risk-averse, ad hoc and short-term manner	Moving away from advocacy work/contentious issues/national scope and focus on service delivery work, less contentious issue, and local level	operates in silo or out of the public eye, and focusing on their partners rather than building alliances
<i>How do minority groups adopt similar strategies?</i>	create more enabling environment to practice religion by working on international norms; coalition building or shaping public opinion; countering negative narrative against minority religion; mobilising political support to strengthen legitimacy.	efforts to survive by combining advocacy work with religious social services to their community; adopting, lobbying, advocacy, mediation and dialog strategies	Moving away from advocacy work/contentious issues/national scope and focus on religious service to their community; approach to local-level institutions rather than national.	operates out of the public eye, practicing religion in silo; assimilating or converting to mainstream religion under closed space



FIGURE 1 Territories of Sunda Wiwitan Cigugur (Author's own map).

against land grabbing by the colonial governments (FGD Sunda Wiwitan September 25, 2020; Interviews with Sunda Wiwitan members and leaders, November 3, 2021, November 11, 2021, and November 12, 2021). Because of their engagement in political contentious movements during the colonial era has, the Sunda Wiwitan community has garnered recognition as a social movement or protest movement (Hidayat & Masturina, 2017; Kartodirdjo, 1973). In the Indonesian literature, there is a growing body of research examining the issue of governmental discrimination against this group from different angles. While anthropological scholars focuses on how this group survives by preserving its teachings and values amidst the penetration of modern and established religions such as Islam, Catholicism, and Christianity (Aripudin, 2020; Indrawardana, 2014; Muttaqin, 2013; Nursananingrat & Bodas, 1977), political science look more into the dynamics of their survival against pressures from state and nonstate actors (Aripudin, 2020; Hidayat & Masturina, 2017; Qodim, 2017).

In terms of governmental discrimination, the Sunda Wiwitan community has been subjected to nearly all forms of restrictions, that have arisen from time to time. In the past, the governments have imposed various administrative restrictions, which hamper their freedom to practice their religious beliefs and traditions, as well as to have their organization clergy acknowledged by the state—one of which led to the government's rejection of their marriage recording, even to this day. When anticommunist propaganda flared up in 1965, this group faced harassment and mobilization from militant groups, while the government associated this group (along with other unofficial religions) with communism and atheism, contending that indigenous beliefs are different from internationally recognized religion and thus, classified indigenous communities as “people still without religion.” During the reigns of Sukarno and Suharto, their organization was banned after being denied registration, followed by threats of criminalization against the Sunda Wiwitan leader, which eventually led to the conversion of thousands of Sunda Wiwitan adherents to Catholicism (Kantor Waligereja Indonesia, 1974; Nursananingrat & Bodas, 1977). While this massive conversion has caused a severe impact on



the decline of Sunda Wiwitan adherents in West Java, this community has also faced religious contestation and proselytizing involving Islamic clerics and Catholic missionaries (Aqiqah, 2014; Aripudin, 2020; Wiardi, 2017). In addition to direct restrictions on religious freedom, this community has also been subjected to various types of restrictions, ranging from discriminatory laws and policies, state surveillance, as well as state's negligence to protect their freedom when facing religious mobilizations from local conservative groups.

Consequently, the practice of religious-based discrimination against the Sunda Wiwitan community has also impacted their civil rights, with access to state-facilitated services constrained, if not denied. Such discrimination occurred not only in the colonial era, but also during the three reigns of Indonesian governments: the post-independence and Sukarno's Guided Democracy era (1945–1966), the Suharto's New Order (1966–1997), and, to a certain extent, the era of democratization (1998 to present). Although political attitudes and government policies on religion have shifted greatly depending on the specific context, they reflected the way the governments view this community and how they exert pressures and restrictions upon the civic space of this community. In general the state has limited the space of Sunda Wiwitan by imposing legal, political, and even extra-legal restrictions. These methods are carried out simultaneously, separately, and interchangeably, depending on the specific context such as changes in regime policies or dynamics of local politics in Kuningan.

Of the three types of restrictions, this community most often experienced legal restrictions, which include administrative restrictions, preventive measures, and discriminative laws. In terms of administrative restrictions, the Sunda Wiwitan followers were often denied access to public services, such as registering marriages, births, deaths, and religious identity in formal documents. From time to time, their efforts to obtain state recognition of their religious identity and organization are frequently rejected. In 1982, the government issued a decree outlawing the teachings of Agama Djawa Sunda as heresy and declared this organisation unlawful (Wulandari et al., 2019, p. 39). The government also prohibited all practices of Sunda Wiwitan rites, including Seren Taun—an annual festival to celebrate the new agriculture year in the Sundanese ancient calendar. This restriction remained in place for a long period, from 1982 to 1999. In the past, their leaders have faced multiple threats of criminalization, prosecution, and arrest on charges associated with communism or civil disobedience (Qodim, 2017; Tendi, 2015). In the present time, legal restrictions are often carried out to justify government actions that directly and indirectly discriminate against the Sunda Wiwitan community. Recent events indicated a trend in which the local governments use bureaucratic barriers to limit the civic space of the Sunda Wiwitan community. In 2020, the government with the support of local conservative groups put a halt on the construction of a tomb called Batu Satangtung on charges of unlicensed construction (Interview with Regent of Kuningan, September 24, 2020). Later in the same year, the government issued a decree rejecting the group's bid for recognition as an indigenous community, citing non-compliance with the formal-procedural criteria stipulated in the ministerial regulations.

Political limitation is another type of restriction that affected this community. This restriction ranged from labeling, stigmatization, surveillance, and co-optation, as well as pressures on space for dialog and freedom for the Sunda Wiwitan community. During the colonial period, the Dutch government labeled Madrais and his followers as a dangerous group, after carrying out a rebellion act in 1869. Furthermore, the government also named Madrais teaching as *Agama Djawa Sunda*, intending to label it as “a new religion,” distinct from Islamic teaching and tradition. This strategy has sparked social hostilities from the Muslim society in Kuningan, particularly from local clerics and their followers in Pesantren (traditional Islamic



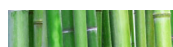
boarding schools), who perceived Madrais' teachings as heretical (Interviews with Sunda Wiwitan leaders November 11–12, 2021). Under the Japanese colonial period, the government also took preventive measures aimed at closing the space by using stigmatization against the Sunda Wiwitan, while at the same time, building alliances with local religious groups to put pressure on this community. During the time of Sukarno and Suharto, the government (notably the Ministry of Religious Affairs), which actively tried to align “underdeveloped religions” such as theirs with Christianity or Islam continued to stigmatize the community by labeling them as non-believers and atheists (Harsono, 2020).

Meanwhile, violence methods against this community were mostly conducted by non-state actors, notably Muslim conservative groups. This method included harassment and persecution of religious mobilizations. In the 1950s, the community faced serious challenges from Muslim militants who repeatedly intimidated and attacked them under the accusation of promoting heresy (Harsono, 2020). In the present day, violence is also employed by both state and non-state actors, particularly when the Sunda Wiwitan community clashes with local actors in Kuningan, such as government officials, conservative groups, local politicians, local figures, and even the business sector. For instance, when the community launched a protest campaign against the geothermal project in Mount Ciremai proposed by Chevron company in 2014, they came into conflicts with the local government and mass organizations who support this project (Interviews with local CSOs December 12 and 14, 2021). In 2020, this community suffered religious mobilization and persecution led by the local Islamist groups, who opposed the construction of a tomb namely Batu Satangtung, accusing it of propagating animism and heresy (Interviews with local actors September 24, 2020; November 10, 2021; November 11, 2021; November 13, 2021; November 19, 2021). Despite popular condemnation of the siege as a violation of religious freedom, the local government chose to overlook the siege and instead, put a halt on the construction (FGD Civil Society, September 9, 2021; FGD Sunda Wiwitan, September 25, 2021; Interviews with Sunda Wiwitan member September 24, 2020). Even after the halt was lifted due to pressures from national activists, politicians, and human rights defenders, the government insisted that the structure of the tomb not resemble a monument (Hurriyah, 2022).

Apart from these constraints, another pervasive problem is that the central government usually does not intervene when regional and local governments institute unconstitutional regulations or break the law themselves (Marshall, 2018, p. 87). One study noted that discrimination against adherents of local religions in various regions of democratized Indonesia took various forms, including forced conversion, dismissal of the local religious group, difficulties in requiring essential civil documents, or accessing job as a civil servant (especially in the military institution), and even persecution of houses of worship and ritual rites of the local religious groups (Sudarto, 2016). In cases where certain groups are perceived as posing a security or political threat, governmental discriminations are more likely to happen. This was the case of the Sunda Wiwitan community, which has been targeted for governmental discrimination, even in the democratization era.

THE SUNDA WIWITAN PUSHBACK AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

Although limited civic space appeared to be a major challenge for the Sunda Wiwitan community, their struggle for survival has demonstrated the significance of the group's resilience on the one hand and how they utilize coping strategies on the other. From the



beginning until now, this group engages with various coping strategies to defend their religious freedom and civic space, either by resisting, adapting, desisting, or even disbanding strategy in response to closed civic space. From time to time, this community uses these strategies separately and interchangeably depending on the specific situation and the varying degree of restrictions to which they have felt directly affected. Among these four strategies, I argue that resistance and adaptation are the most commonly used, as they were carried out in response to direct threats or state-led discriminations, while at the same time, maintaining their civic space by adapting to policy changes or shifting attitudes of the governments that directly and indirectly affect their space.

The Sunda Wiwitan only used desisting and disbanding strategies under closed civic space. These strategies were utilized when the group dealt with harsh repression from the state, especially in the colonial and the New Order era. During these times, the Sunda Wiwitan changed its name and identity multiple times as a way to maintain the group's survival. Even when their organization was outlawed, the group continued to practice the Madrais principles in their daily lives even without associating with a formal organization. However, when it was obvious that the community's survival was threatened by the closing space issue, the Sunda Wiwitan leader took the most difficult path, such as disbanding the organization or even initiating faith conversion. The disbandment of their organization was done when the Sunda Wiwitan leader faced military threats and criminalization attempts from the government and local religious groups. In a similar manner, the Sunda Wiwitan leader and his followers converted their faith to official religions (notably Catholicism and Islam) in the New Order era when the government's attitudes and policies were increasingly repressive.

Resistance emerged as one of the prevalent strategies for the group's survival. This strategy is used from time to time, as a direct response to state-led discrimination or specific context that threatens their civic space. Their first attempt was to launch several insurgencies against the Dutch authorities in West Java to protest against plantation slavery. The Sunda Wiwitan continued to show resistance when the colonial governments forced the disbandment of the organization, the expulsion of their leader, as well as forced conversion to Islam. Resistance strategy was also used several times during the long periods of the Sukarno's and Suharto's administrations. When the government introduced a ministerial regulation in 1946 regarding marriage ratification by government officials, the community strongly opposed the law and continued to conduct their own marital ceremonies (Tendi, 2015, p. 190). Notwithstanding limited space for religious freedom under Suharto's administration, this community has managed to revive its existence by re-establishing its organization and consolidating its followers, including those who have already converted to other religions. They also managed to create a new space by claiming a new identity as an indigenous community. By doing so, they were able to get sources of funds for numerous initiatives, including the rehabilitation of their cultural heritage structures, the construction of a private school belonging to the community, the annual celebration of Seren Taun festivals, and also the construction of Batu Satangtung tomb.

At the same time, this group continued to counter stigmatization and win over narratives, values, and influence by using multiple modern media and close relations with some journalists. Furthermore, they retained tight ties with many national and local political and societal actors, including lawmakers, legislators, civil society activists, and moderate groups. In cases where this community experiences discrimination or conflict as a result of state or nonstate actors, they use this national-level support to exert pressure on local governments and gather media attention. In many cases, this strategy is quite successful to bring about public



attention to the Sunda Wiwitan community, not only from the national and local communities but also international communities. As one study showed, big data analysis on news coverage related to local religions and discrimination against these groups has shown that the Sunda Wiwitan received the most media coverage in Indonesia. Further examination also revealed the contestation of narratives between the local government and the Sunda Wiwitan: although the first tends to frame the Sunda Wiwitan issues as either cultural expression or administrative barriers, the latter tries to counter such narrative and emphasizes the issue of religious freedom, civil rights, and discriminations (Hurriyah, 2022). In this regard, the Sunda Wiwitan also utilized the issue of pluralism, human rights, and socio-cultural issues to contest the local government's narrative, while simultaneously hoping for public acceptance.

During the leadership of Jatikusumah (Madraih's grandson), resistance strategies are often used in conjunction and interchangeably with adapting strategies to the prevailing socio-political situation. His efforts to advocate for the Sunda Wiwitan rights were carried out by building close contacts with prominent national figures like former president Abdurrahman Wahid, who assisted him in developing networks with national politicians, activists, and human rights advocates. Using these networks, he then established a national forum for interfaith dialog which enabled the community to engage with various groups of religious organizations and CSOs, such as Unity in Diversity National Alliance (ANBTI), Journalist Alliance for Diversity (SEJUK), the Interfaith Dialog Society (MADIA), Legal Aid Organization (LBH), and the Nadlatul Ulama (NU). To create an enabling environment in which indigenous communities in Indonesia can organize and advocate their rights to be formulated into the policy-making process, Jatikusumah along with hundreds of indigenous community leaders established an umbrella organization in 1999, namely the Alliance of Indigineous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN). They also managed to expand their national-level networking by engaging with various socio-political actors, including government officials, politicians, political parties, and national religious leaders, as well as with state agencies such as the National Commission for Human Rights (Komnas HAM) and the National Women Commission (Komnas Perempuan).

Moreover, the community has also successfully encouraged one of their leaders (Dewi Kanti, Jatikusumah's daughter) to occupy the position of Commissioner of Komnas Perempuan. This has helped the community in strengthening their networks. Their close alliance with civil society has also influenced the way this group adopts advocacy strategies that are often used by CSOs, such as building social and political alliances, creating various supporting groups, working with journalists and media, contesting and winning over narratives, and conducting 'campaigns' to create a positive opinion on the Sunda Wiwitan community through various media, including new media like Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and webinar forums. Compared with other groups, the Sunda Wiwitan can utilize online media to talk about their community, spread ideas and narratives about the importance of cultural preservation and diversity, as well as the rights of indigenous communities as the manifestation and an important part of Indonesian pluralism.

Having experienced forced disbandment in the past, and in response to policy changes, nowadays the Sunda Wiwitan chose to identify themselves as a believer group (*kelompok penghayat*) and indigenous community (*masyarakat adat*) rather than establishing a formal organization. Considering past labeling as heretic teachings, the group has adopted a new identity that reflects more on their ethnicity and philosophical teachings, namely Sunda Wiwitan, so that it could be more accepted and embraced ex-Madraih followers. Since their community has become a multireligious community where in one family there are different



religions and beliefs, the Sunda Wiwitan has declared themselves as an open community that accept all religions. Thus, their members can associate themselves as part of the Sunda Wiwitan community, while still adhering to their religion (FGD, September 25, 2020). This strategy has been successful in influencing public acceptance, to the point that this community is now recognized as a microcosm or the miniature of Indonesian society that promotes religious harmony and pluralism (Deniawati, 2004; Kepustakaan Nasional 2013; Marpuah, 2019). Correspondingly, their claimed new identities have enabled them to broaden their advocacy work which now include not just religious freedom but also collective rights—which has been challenged for the past recent years by the local government and religious groups in Kuningan.

When confronted with the government's opposition to their bid to become a recognized indigenous community, they employed a variety of adaptation strategies to garner public support. Although the permit is under the local government's authority, the Sunda Wiwitan community tried to pull some strings with the national government offices and national political figures, including the presidential office, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, parliament members, and political parties. They also adopt advocacy strategies that are often used by NGOs, such as building an alliance with civil society activists and organizations, creating various supporting groups, working with journalists and media, disseminating the issue, framing the issue, as well as creating positive public opinion through cultural movement. In doing so, they utilized new media like Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and webinar forums to talk about their community and to spread ideas and narratives about the importance of cultural preservation, pluralism, and diversity, as well as the rights of indigenous communities—as representation and important part of Indonesian pluralism.

When confronted with the government's opposition to their bid to become a recognized indigenous community, they employed a variety of adaptation strategies to garner public support. Despite the fact that the permit is under the authority of the local government, the *Sunda Wiwitan* community attempted to reach out to national government offices and national political figures, including the presidential office, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, parliament members, and political parties. They also use advocacy strategies commonly used by NGOs, such as forming alliances with civil society activists and organizations, forming various support groups, collaborating with journalists and media, disseminating the issue, framing the issue, and generating positive public opinion through cultural movements. In doing so, they used new media such as Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and webinar forums to talk about their community and spread ideas and narratives about the importance of cultural preservation, pluralism, and diversity, as well as indigenous communities' rights -as representation and an important part of Indonesian pluralism (Figure 2).

In addition to advocacy, the Sunda Wiwitan community has also pursued legal efforts to advocate their rights. For instance, they have submitted several judicial reviews to the Constitutional Court seeking the repeal of the administration law, the abolition of the blasphemy laws, recognition of the rights of the indigenous people, and, most recently, recognition of religious beliefs. In terms of civic space, their success in carrying out advocacy and judicialization of religious freedom has enhanced their political salience as a “visible” micro-sized group. Although in practice, the decisions of the Constitutional Court have not been fully implemented nor guaranteed the fulfillment of the civil rights of the adherents of indigenous religions in Indonesia. Although there are more challenges in which they have to deal with various state and non-state actors at different levels and different situation, the case of the Sunda Wiwitan community shows their ability to use different adapting strategy in different contexts have gained recognition as among the most empowered, visible, and politically salient

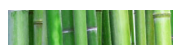


FIGURE 2 The use of new media by the Sunda Wiwitan community.

religious communities in Indonesia (FGD and interviews with national CSO activists, September 9, 2020; November 14, 2021; December 11, 2021).

The Sunda Wiwitan case stand in stark contrast to how many small religious groups are merely surviving and enduring state-led discrimination. In the case of the Shia and Ahmadiyya communities in Indonesia, despite receiving a lot of support from civil society and human rights defenders, these groups are unable to assert their civic space when dealing with religious mobilization. Instead, many of their followers adopt integration and assimilation strategies to avoid hostilities from the majority groups. Examples of this situation occurred in the Ahmadiyya community in Jambi, in which this group carried out social integration efforts to maintain its existence at a time when Ahmadiyya congregations in several regions in Indonesia suffered tragic fates after their places of worship were vandalized and their members suffered acts of violence perpetrated by residents in the period 2003–2013 (Suhadak et al., 2021). Similarly, the Shia community in Sampang, which suffered a series of religious persecutions in 2011–2013, has finally chosen to assimilate itself with the Sunni majority in Sampang. After enduring forced displacement for almost a decade, more than 300 Shia followers, including their leader, have renounced their faith to Sunni as part of the agreement with the local government and religious authorities who set the terms of repatriation from the refugee camps to their hometowns in Sampang. Although this strategy has enabled the ex-Shia community to access a variety of government services and social distribution, it has failed to advocate their fundamental rights and instead, compensate for social acceptance at the expense of religious freedom.

Likewise, many indigenous groups in Indonesia also maintained their survival by alienating themselves and setting group boundaries from the society, so as not to create a perceived threat to majority groups and preserve their cultural values. The Sunda Kanekes community in Banten province is an example of this. Although they share the same beliefs as the Sunda Wiwitan in Cigugur, the Sunda Kanekes has received state recognition as an indigenous community and is classified as intangible cultural part of Indonesian history. Other examples are indigenous Marapu group in Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara, and the Parmalim group in North



Sumatera, who adopt assimilation and preservation strategies to maintain the group's survival. In this regard, one study shows that many Marapu families allow their children to choose Catholicism to gain access to public services, education, and the workplace. At the same time, they only left one of their children to continue to adhere to the Marapu religion as a way to maintain their existence at the risk of being discriminated against (Gaffar, 2019).

Observations on the group's survival in other regions reveal comparable problems such as the case of religious minorities in Indonesia. Although the explanations are varied from one to another, many studies have found that religious minorities or small groups rely more on survival strategies rather than fighting back against repression (Elsass, 1995; Kondo, 2021; Lamoreaux, 2016; Rosyid, 2022; Wakamatsu, 2021). These strategies mainly consist of integration, self-alienation, and identity or cultural preservation. In the case of ethnocultural groups, these strategies also include assortment and group boundaries as prerequisites for the minority culture to survive (Bell, 2018). This is what happens in the case of Alevis communities in Turkey when they devised survival strategies that allowed them to adapt to the Sunni majority society through adopting general Islamic values rather than assimilating themselves into Sunni (Wakamatsu, 2021). Meanwhile, four religious communities in Latvia and Lithuania, Hare Krishnas, Jews, Mormons, and Muslims, have adopted a self-alienation strategy to maintain the group's survival, as all four have viewed their values and identities as threatened (although to differing extents) by the governments, local populations, and societal organizations (Lamoreaux, 2016). In addition, few studies have analyzed the situation where religious minorities adopt survival strategies depending on the internal resources of their communities. Such was the case of Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities who survived the Islamic State occupation by mobilizing self-defense groups and collaborating with members of the anti-ISIS coalition (Knappe, 2021).

Based on the findings of the Sunda Wiwitan community and its comparison with how most religious minorities employ survival tactics, the Sunda Wiwitan case has shown a good example of how minority groups can survive and remain resilient under repression. In the context of shrinking civic space, the Sunda Wiwitan case shows how resilience and pushback are especially important in response to rising government religious-based discrimination, which has affected the deterioration of religious freedom in democratized Indonesia. Although, the relentless discrimination that the Sunda Wiwitan experienced made a case where the use of various strategies interchangeably depending on the specific context of discrimination is very crucial to maintain the group's survival. Other important lessons from the Sunda Wiwitan case are the ability of the groups to enhance their political salient by working closely with civil society organizations. This connection has not only helped them build support groups for advocacy works, but also encouraged the group to adopt similar coping strategies as the civil society when facing state restrictions. Although the strategies used by the Sunda Wiwitan are not unique to civil society organizations, they have not been widely used by religious minorities. Hence, the Sunda Wiwitan case provides insights into how resistance, adaptation, and even temporary desisting strategies play an important role in maintaining survival and asserting the religious freedom of minorities amidst shrinking civic space.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I argue that the use of various coping strategies is important not only for the group's survival but also for its ability to ignite pushback against state-led discrimination. Even though the adoption of survival strategies can help religious minorities to endure the brunt of



discrimination, resistance and adaptation are critical to assert the civic space of religious minorities. The findings of this research have shown that when a micro-sized group can use these strategies interchangeably and effectively when responding to direct and indirect threats, they can help to maintain the group's survival and resilience. As described in the article, the ability of Sunda Wiwitan to use various coping strategies from resisting, adapting, and even desisting and disbanding have shaped their resilience under relentless state-led repression and made them politically salient compared to other religious minorities in Indonesia. Yet, the Sunda Wiwitan case also provides a good example of the importance of building alliances with various components of civil society groups (and even political actors) in advocating the rights of religious minorities and framing government religious-based discrimination within larger issues such as democracy, human rights, and civic issues.

Insights on the elements that define a group's survival under state-led discrimination, such as those in the Sunda Wiwitan case, may also be usefully applied to other situations of governmental discrimination against micro-sized groups in Indonesia and beyond regions. In contrast to general trends of minority groups relying on survival strategies such as self-alienation, assimilation, or integration with the majority, some religious minorities have become active in asserting their civic space in certain conditions. Previous studies have tended to focus on the survival of religious minorities under repression and religious mobilization, however, groups' resilience and resistance must also be considered.

By highlighting the dynamic interplay of restriction and pushback, this article also makes important contributions toward filling in the gaps in the studies of religious discrimination. The use of civic space theory to reframe this interplay has offered theoretical innovation and novelty in two aspects: first, it provides more accurate explanations of the dynamic interplay between state-led discriminations and pushbacks from religious minorities. Second, it shows correlations and similarities between methods of state restriction on civil society and religious minorities albeit in a different context. This study is also novel in that it is one of the few that focuses on a religious group at the micro level rather than a general observation of the problems of religious-based discrimination against religious minorities. The result of this research shows that observation at the meso- and micro-level should be part of the agenda for future research as they are important for documentation of varying governmental discriminations on the one hand, and resilience of the minority groups on the other.

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