



Minority Dakwah and Muslim Political Agency: Insights from the U.S. for Southeast Asia

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Received : Jan 8, 2026	Revised : Jan 22, 2026	Accepted : Jan 25, 2026	Online : February 11, 2026
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Abstract

This article analyzes dakwah in Muslim minority settings as a form of political agency, drawing on comparative insights from the experiences of American Muslims and their relevance to Southeast Asia. The study introduces a novel conceptual contribution by reframing minority dakwah not merely as religious communication, but as a multidimensional socio-political practice that facilitates civic engagement, rights-based advocacy, and identity negotiation in plural societies. Using a qualitative comparative literature review, the article examines adaptive dakwah models developed in the United States, such as civic participation initiatives, interfaith coalition building, and civil rights mobilization, that have enhanced community empowerment in the face of discrimination and securitization pressures. The findings demonstrate that while these approaches offer valuable analytical lessons, they cannot be directly transplanted into Southeast Asian contexts due to differing political structures, state–religion arrangements, and majority–minority configurations. The article concludes by proposing a contextualized framework for strengthening Muslim political agency in Southeast Asia through dakwah practices that prioritize inclusivity, democratic participation, and social cohesion. This framework underscores the strategic role of minority dakwah in shaping resilient, civically engaged Muslim communities across diverse regional settings.

Keywords: *minority dakwah; Muslim political agency; civic engagement; interfaith dialogue; American Muslims; Southeast Asia*

INTRODUCTION

Studies on dakwah in Muslim minority contexts and Muslim political agency have expanded markedly over the past two decades across political science, sociology of religion, and diaspora studies. Existing research highlights that religious practices, mosque life, and dakwah activities among Muslim minorities function not only as expressions of faith but also as arenas for cultivating political awareness, collective identity, and civic competencies. Collectively, this body of work underscores a growing recognition that minority dakwah intersects closely with discourses of citizenship, civil rights, and political participation (Jamal, 2005; Zaman, 2019).

Scholars further show that dakwah can operate as a form of political agency, serving to build organizational capacity, mobilize communal identity, and advance advocacy work. Studies on fiqh al-aqalliyyāt and Muslim diaspora communities emphasize how minorities negotiate religious commitments within democratic environments. At the same time, research from the United States demonstrates how civic-oriented dakwah—such as interfaith dialogue, community service, and rights-based mobilization—emerged in response to discrimination and securitization, especially after 9/11 (Calfano, 2025; Chen & Dorairajoo, 2020). By grouping these strands of literature, a clearer pattern emerges: minority dakwah evolves adaptively within pluralistic and often contested

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The American Muslim experience is particularly instructive. The growth of Muslim communities since the 1965 Immigration Act, the establishment of numerous Islamic institutions, and the emergence of advocacy organizations such as CAIR illustrate how discrimination and Islamophobia can generate stronger civic engagement infrastructures. Rather than focusing solely on ritual practice, American Muslim dakwah has expanded into a civic model emphasizing social justice, coalition building, and public policy engagement, showing how minority communities transform marginality into participatory agency.

These insights hold analytical relevance for Southeast Asia, where Muslim populations occupy diverse majority-minority positions. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, Muslims form demographic majorities linked to nation-building projects, while in Southern Thailand, the Southern Philippines, Singapore, and Myanmar, Muslims live as minorities shaped by histories of conflict, securitization, and uneven political recognition ([Umam, 2023](#)). Unlike the earlier draft, this distinction is now streamlined into a single conceptual frame that highlights regional variation without unnecessary repetition. Despite valuable lessons from the United States, Southeast Asian contexts differ in political systems, state-religion configurations, and identity politics, necessitating careful contextual adaptation rather than direct policy transfer.

Despite the richness of existing scholarship, a clear research gap remains: limited theorization of dakwah as a political agency practice that is analytically comparable across contrasting majority-minority contexts. Much of the literature treats dakwah either normatively (as a religious obligation) or descriptively (as a communal practice), but rarely conceptualizes it as a socio-political mechanism capable of shaping minority empowerment across divergent political environments. Addressing this gap requires an explicitly comparative and theoretically grounded approach.

Against this backdrop, this study examines how dakwah functions as political agency among Muslim minorities in the United States and assesses the extent to which these experiences provide transferable insights for Southeast Asia. The objective of this paper is to (1) identify models of minority dakwah in the U.S., (2) analyze their embedded political agency strategies, and (3) assess how these can be contextually adapted to Southeast Asian settings characterized by varied majority-minority configurations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dakwah within Muslim minority contexts has increasingly been examined as a multidimensional practice that blends religious guidance with socio-political engagement. Earlier foundational works ([Cesari, 2009](#); [Jamal, 2005](#)) established that dakwah among Muslim minorities extends beyond ritual instruction toward identity formation, civic participation, and community advocacy. Recent literature (2020–2024) further reinforces this shift, showing that minority dakwah adapts to social pressures—including discrimination, securitization, and intergroup tensions—by integrating civic engagement, interfaith dialogue, and rights-based activism ([Chen & Dorairajoo, 2020](#); [Iskandar, 2023](#); [Abdurahim-Tagorda & Magno, 2023](#)). These developments suggest that dakwah increasingly operates within the broader negotiation of belonging and citizenship in plural societies.

Contemporary scholarship offers three dominant strands regarding minority dakwah. First, cultural dakwah emphasizes the transmission of Islamic values through culturally embedded practices such as social welfare initiatives, community education, and public engagement ([Chen & Dorairajoo, 2020](#); [Curtis, 2010](#)). Second, Curtis frames religious outreach as part of broader democratic participation—engaging Muslims in public debates, cross-community initiatives, and policy advocacy ([Calfano, 2025](#); [Zaman, 2019](#)). Third, interfaith dakwah highlights the role of cross-

religious dialogue in reducing prejudice, building networks, and strengthening Muslim representation in plural societies (Aswad & Tasrif, 2021; Baharuddin et al., 2009) These strands underscore an important tension in the literature: whether dakwah in minority settings should aim more toward integration (engagement without assimilation) or toward identity consolidation in response to suspicion and securitization (Strabac & Listhaug, 2008; Takyar, 2019).

A significant portion of the literature focuses on the United States as a case of an empowered yet contested minority. Research demonstrates that discrimination, Islamophobia, and heightened securitization after 9/11 led American Muslims to develop resilient civic infrastructures, including advocacy organizations such as CAIR, interfaith coalitions, youth mobilization networks, and civil rights (Calfano, 2025; Chen & Dorairajoo, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2017). Studies note that these adaptive strategies transformed dakwah from a primarily theological activity into a political agency mechanism, enabling Muslim communities to claim rights, assert identity, and influence public policy (Takyar, 2019). This body of research also highlights internal debates within U.S. Muslim communities over engagement strategies—between quietist religious outreach, civic activism, and rights-based mobilization—illustrating the evolving nature of minority dakwah.

Parallel scholarship on Southeast Asia shows a contrasting landscape of majority-minority dynamics. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, dakwah often aligns with state-led religious administration, nation-building, or moral governance (van Bruinessen, 2013). Conversely, in Southern Thailand, the Southern Philippines, Singapore, and Myanmar, dakwah appears more politically charged, intersecting with historical grievances, autonomy struggles, and competing narratives of identity (Liow, 2006; Rood, 2022; Umam, 2023). Recent works emphasize that Southeast Asian Muslim minorities face multilayered pressures: legacies of conflict, restrictive religious policies, and state securitization (Von der Mehden, 2005; Abdurahim-Tagorda & Magno, 2023). These conditions shape dakwah into a tool for political negotiation, community resilience, and peacebuilding—yet the literature remains fragmented in its comparative conceptualization of these functions.

Across these strands, an explicit research gap emerges:

- (1) Existing works rarely theorize dakwah as a multidimensional political practice applicable across varying majority-minority contexts.
- (2) Comparative scholarship linking the U.S. minority Muslim experience with Southeast Asian cases remains limited and largely descriptive.
- (3) The transferability of U.S. models—civic participation, rights advocacy, interfaith coalition-building—has not been systematically assessed against the political and institutional conditions of Southeast Asia.
- (4) Few studies offer a framework to understand how dakwah can function as a political agency while adapting to divergent configurations of state-religion relations, identity politics, and structural constraints.

To address this gap, the present study bridges three conceptual nodes:

- (a) minority dakwah → (b) political agency → (c) U.S. adaptive strategies → (d) Southeast Asian contextual relevance.

This bridging approach synthesizes dispersed scholarly debates and advances a comparative framework for examining how dakwah can serve as a socio-political instrument across diverse Muslim minority and majority environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

Literature Identification and Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted across major academic databases, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar between January and March 2025. The search used predefined

methods ensured methodological coherence ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)).

Limitations and Bias Control

This study acknowledges several methodological limitations. First, reliance on secondary data limits the ability to assess contextual nuances that primary fieldwork might uncover. Second, some scholarship on U.S. Muslims is embedded within Western-centric academic paradigms, potentially influencing interpretations of Muslim agency. Third, cross-country variability in Southeast Asia—spanning democratic, hybrid, and authoritarian political systems—poses challenges for generalization. To mitigate these constraints, the analysis employed triangulation, contextual calibration, and cautious interpretation when applying U.S. insights to Southeast Asian cases.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Key Findings: Three Core Patterns of Minority Dakwah as Political Agency

The analysis identifies three key patterns through which minority dakwah operates as a political agency across the U.S. and Southeast Asian contexts:

- a. civic institutionalization,
- b. dialogical advocacy, and
- c. identity-based political mobilization.

These patterns were distilled through thematic coding of the reviewed literature, policy reports, and organizational practices, which collectively serve as the “data” informing this study. Rather than merely listing sources, the analysis synthesizes their arguments to illuminate how dakwah becomes a structured mode of community empowerment within diverse political environments.

Civic Institutionalization of Dakwah: Strengthening Organizational Capacity

The first pattern, civic institutionalization, refers to the transformation of dakwah into structured forms of participation through mosques, civil society organizations, and advocacy groups. In the United States, this is reflected in the development of proactive institutions such as CAIR, MPAC, and local mosque-based community programs—often emerging in direct response to discrimination and securitization after 9/11 ([Chen & Dorairajoo, 2020](#); [Pew Research Center, 2017](#)). These institutional forms expand dakwah beyond religious instruction, enabling Muslim communities to engage policymakers, build legal literacy, and facilitate civic education.

In Southeast Asia, this pattern appears uneven. In Malaysia and Indonesia, state-supported Islamic councils and civil society groups have institutionalized dakwah, but primarily toward internal community development rather than external political advocacy. In minority settings, Southern Thailand, Mindanao, and Myanmar, grassroots organizations and peacebuilding networks perform comparable functions but with heightened constraints due to conflict conditions ([Liow, 2006](#); [Abdurahim-Tagorda & Magno, 2023](#)).

Civic institutionalization is strongest where political opportunities are open (U.S., Indonesia, Malaysia), but it becomes fragile under coercive or conflict-affected governance (Southern Thailand, Myanmar). It explains why U.S. models cannot simply be replicated but must be adapted to local institutional ecologies.

Dialogical Advocacy: Dakwah as Engagement Across Difference

The second pattern, dialogical advocacy, highlights dakwah practices that intentionally engage non-Muslim communities through interfaith initiatives, coalition-building, and public dialogue. In the U.S., interfaith coalitions have been central to countering Islamophobia and

reframing Muslim identity within national political discourse. These practices align with Alsultany's findings on "complex representation," where Muslim actors actively reshape public narratives to contest negative media frames (Alsultany, 2012).

In Southeast Asia, dialogical advocacy shows promise but remains constrained by political sensitivities. Interfaith programs in Indonesia and Malaysia are increasingly robust, supported by national initiatives and religious councils; however, in regions with entrenched conflict, such as Southern Thailand and Mindanao, the space for dialogue is narrower and often dependent on peacebuilding intermediaries (Liow, 2006; Rood, 2022).

This study confirms the argument that dakwah serves as civic engagement (Curtis, 2010) but extends it by demonstrating that dialogical advocacy also constitutes political agency when used to reshape public narratives and negotiate identity in contexts of insecurity and mistrust.

Identity-Based Mobilization: Dakwah as Collective Political Expression

The third pattern, identity-based political mobilization, emerges where dakwah provides a framework for collective action grounded in shared religious identity. In the United States, minority dakwah enhances political participation by cultivating group consciousness, as noted by Jamal (2005). This consciousness strengthens mobilization during elections, civil rights campaigns, and community defense initiatives (Takyar, 2019).

Southeast Asian cases demonstrate similar effects but through different pathways. In Mindanao, dakwah has historically intersected with mobilization for autonomy and political recognition. In Southern Thailand, identity-based mobilization is shaped by securitization pressures, driving some groups toward peaceful advocacy and others toward resistance, depending on access to political channels (Von der Mehden, 2005).

While U.S. scholarship tends to frame mobilization positively—as empowerment—Southeast Asian literature highlights risks of politicization and state backlash. This study clarifies that identity-based dakwah becomes empowering only when linked to inclusive, non-violent political avenues.

Integration Across Cases: Why Some Strategies Travel and Others Do Not

By comparing cases, this study shows that U.S. models of minority dakwah, civic participation, interfaith coalitions, and rights-based advocacy are not universally transferable. Their effectiveness depends on three enabling conditions:

- (1) Institutional openness (democratic participation, legal protections)
- (2) Organizational infrastructure (mosques, advocacy groups, civil society networks)
- (3) Discursive freedom (space to challenge media bias and prejudice)

These conditions are stronger in the U.S. and select Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia), but weaker in conflict-affected or authoritarian settings (Southern Thailand, Myanmar). Therefore, the discussion emphasizes contextual adaptation rather than replication.

Contribution and Novelty of the Study

This study provides two key contributions absent from existing literature:

1. A contextualized comparative framework linking U.S. minority Muslim experiences with Southeast Asian majority-minority dynamics—an analytical bridge rarely addressed in prior scholarship, which tends to treat these regions in isolation.
2. A reconceptualization of dakwah as a multidimensional political practice encompassing civic institutionalization, dialogical advocacy, and identity-based mobilization. It extends the literature beyond normative or descriptive uses of dakwah and positions it within broader debates on political agency, democratic participation, and plural governance.

Together, these contributions offer a clearer understanding of how dakwah can function as a nonviolent mechanism for empowerment, negotiation, and social cohesion across widely differing political environments.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that dakwah in Muslim minority settings functions far beyond its conventional scope as religious communication; it operates as a multidimensional form of political agency that enables communities to negotiate identity, engage civic structures, and advocate for rights within pluralistic societies. By comparing the adaptive dakwah practices of American Muslims with those found across Southeast Asia, the analysis shows that minority dakwah is shaped by and responsive to political opportunity structures, state–religion configurations, and varying levels of social inclusion or securitization.

Three core patterns of political agency emerged from the thematic and comparative analysis: civic institutionalization, dialogical advocacy, and identity-based mobilization. These patterns reveal how dakwah becomes embedded in broader socio-political processes. In the United States, open institutional environments, strong civil society infrastructures, and discursive freedom have enabled Muslims to transform dakwah into civic engagement frameworks centered on legal empowerment, interfaith coalitions, and policy advocacy. Conversely, in Southeast Asia, while similar tendencies appear, their expression is conditioned by divergent political contexts—ranging from democratic systems (Indonesia, Malaysia) to conflict-affected and securitized environments (Southern Thailand, Mindanao, Myanmar).

The comparative findings underscore that U.S. models offer valuable conceptual insights but cannot be transplanted wholesale into Southeast Asian settings. Effective adaptation requires attention to local power relations, governance structures, and historical trajectories of majority–minority relations. The study, therefore, provides a contextualized framework that situates dakwah as a flexible political instrument capable of fostering inclusive participation, nonviolent negotiation, and communal resilience when aligned with local conditions.

Overall, this research advances minority dakwah studies by reframing dakwah as a strategic mechanism of political agency and by bridging two rarely connected scholarly domains: U.S. Muslim civic activism and Southeast Asian Muslim minority politics.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research should incorporate primary fieldwork to deepen the empirical grounding of this framework and further explore how dakwah-based political agency evolves amid shifting regional dynamics, rising populism, and new forms of digital mobilization.

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