Islamophobia and Post-Conflict Dynamics Affecting the Moro Muslim Minority in Southern Philippines, 2020–2024

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Islamophobia and the conflict dynamics experienced by the Moro Muslim minority in Southern Philippines during 2020–2024. The main issue is how anti-Muslim sentiment influence the post-Bangsamoro peace process. The research aims to analyze the interaction between political, security, and social factors driving discrimination and violence. The conceptual framework is based on securitization theory. The method applied is qualitative document analysis, covering reports from international human rights organizations, official government policies, and media coverage. Findings reveal that despite political progress through the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), Islamophobia remains instrumentalized by certain actors to sustain threat narratives, hinder integration, and fuel horizontal tensions. The study recommends strengthening minority protection mechanisms and ensuring independent monitoring of policy implementation in BARMM.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji Islamophobia dan dinamika konflik yang dialami minoritas Muslim Moro di Filipina Selatan pada periode 2020–2024. Permasalahan utama adalah bagaimana sentimen anti-Muslim mempengaruhi proses perdamaian pasca-Perjanjian Bangsamoro. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis interaksi antara faktor politik, keamanan, dan sosial yang memicu diskriminasi serta kekerasan. Kerangka konseptual yang digunakan adalah teori securitization. Metode penelitian yang diterapkan adalah studi kualitatif dengan analisis dokumen, meliputi laporan lembaga HAM internasional, kebijakan resmi pemerintah, dan pemberitaan media. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun terdapat kemajuan politik melalui Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), Islamophobia tetap digunakan oleh aktor tertentu untuk mempertahankan narasi ancaman, menghambat integrasi, dan memicu ketegangan horizontal. Rekomendasi penelitian ini menekankan perlunya penguatan mekanisme perlindungan minoritas dan pengawasan independen terhadap implementasi kebijakan di BARMM.

INTRODUCTION

The Moro Muslim minority in Southern Philippines is one of the communities that has experienced the longest history of social, political, and economic marginalization in Southeast Asia. The legacy of colonialism, the formation of the Philippine nation-state centered on a Christian identity, and prolonged armed conflict in Mindanao have shaped unequal relations between the Moro community and the state. The establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) through the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 2019 has been normatively regarded as a turning point toward peace and reconciliation. However, developments during the 2020–2024 period indicate that post-peace dynamics have not automatically eliminated practices of stigmatization and exclusion against the Moro community.

In the post-establishment phase of BARMM, Islamophobia continues to emerge as a recurring and evolving phenomenon. Islamophobia is manifested not only in the form of hate speech or social prejudice, but also embedded within public policies, security practices, and media representations that collectively frame Moro Muslim identity as problematic. This pattern demonstrates that Islamophobia in Southern Philippines is not static, but rather evolves through continuous interactions among state actors, media, local political structures, and societal responses.

Previous studies have generally analyzed discrimination against Moro Muslims through the lenses of armed conflict, security policies, or failures in peace implementation. Abbas (2019) highlights how state policies have sustained the image of the Moro as a threat to national stability, while Montiel and De Guzman (2021) demonstrate the role of the media in reproducing associations between Islam and radicalism in the aftermath of the 2017 Marawi incident. These studies offer important contributions; however, they tend to conceptualize Islamophobia as a direct product of conflict or specific policies, rather than as the outcome of continuously evolving systemic interactions within a post-conflict context.

This article proceeds from the assumption that Islamophobia toward the Moro community in the post-2019 period is more accurately understood as part of a dynamic socio-political system, rather than as a linear response to security threats. Accordingly, this study employs Dynamic Systems Theory to analyze how Islamophobia is produced, reproduced, and modified through interactions among various subsystems, including the state, media, local political actors, public policies, and societal perceptions over a given period.

From a dynamic systems perspective, society is understood as a complex adaptive system, in which changes in one element can trigger cascading responses in others (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014; Mitleton-Kelly, 2011). Within this framework, Islamophobia is not viewed as a single variable or a standalone policy, but rather as an emergent pattern arising from repeated interactions among political narratives, governance practices, social crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), and electoral dynamics. This approach enables a more context-sensitive analysis of shifting conditions, policy adaptation, and the persistence of stigma even as the objective conditions of conflict have changed.

The BARMM context during the 2020–2024 period offers a unique empirical case for this approach. On the one hand, large-scale violence has relatively declined compared to the pre-2017 period. On the other hand, new patterns of stigmatization have emerged that are not always rooted in armed conflict, but instead revolve around issues of public health, social order, and political stability. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, Moro communities were frequently positioned in public narratives as sources of social and health risks, despite the lack of consistent empirical evidence supporting such claims. This illustrates the capacity of discursive and policy systems to adapt and sustain exclusionary patterns across different threat contexts.

In terms of originality, this study distinguishes itself from the existing literature in three main aspects. First, it explicitly focuses on the post-establishment phase of BARMM, which has received relatively limited attention in studies of Islamophobia in Southeast Asia. Second, the article employs Dynamic Systems Theory to explain the persistence of Islamophobia—an approach that remains underutilized in

analyses of conflict and Muslim minorities in Southern Philippines. Third, the study conceptualizes Islamophobia as a cross-sectoral, systemic phenomenon involving policy frameworks, media representations, and social interactions, rather than merely as a consequence of specific security policies. In terms of originality, this study distinguishes itself from the existing literature in three main aspects. First, it explicitly focuses on the post-establishment phase of BARMM, which has received relatively limited attention in studies of Islamophobia in Southeast Asia. Second, the article employs Dynamic Systems Theory to explain the persistence of Islamophobia—an approach that remains underutilized in analyses of conflict and Muslim minorities in Southern Philippines. Third, the study conceptualizes Islamophobia as a cross-sectoral, systemic phenomenon involving policy frameworks, media representations, and social interactions, rather than merely as a consequence of specific security policies.

This research adopts a qualitative approach, with document analysis as the primary method. Data are drawn from reports by international human rights organizations, Philippine government policy documents, and coverage from national mainstream media. Thematic analysis is employed to map patterns of interaction among actors, shifts in narratives over time, and the impacts of policies on the social, economic, and political lives of Moro communities. This approach allows for the tracing of systemic dynamics that shape Islamophobia as an adaptive phenomenon within a post-conflict context.

By employing a dynamic systems perspective, this study contributes to the expansion of academic discourse on Islamophobia and post-conflict peacebuilding in Southeast Asia. The findings are expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how stigma against Moro communities persists despite the establishment of a legal framework for autonomy, while also offering a conceptual foundation for the formulation of more inclusive and adaptive policies in the BARMM region.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Islamophobia

Over the past decade, Islamophobia has increasingly become a focus of academic inquiry due to its significant impact on social integration, security policies, and the protection of human rights. In this article, Islamophobia is positioned primarily as a phenomenon operating at the level of state policy and discourse—particularly through the narratives and actions of Philippine government officials and security forces—rather than as a collective attitude of the Filipino population as a whole. This emphasis is important to avoid generalizing Filipino society, while also demonstrating that Islamophobic practices are more frequently manifested through policy constructions, security discourses, and the institutionalization of stigma against Muslim communities, especially the Moro group. In contemporary definitions, Islamophobia encompasses practices, discourses, and policies that marginalize Muslims through negative labeling, stereotypical representations, and discriminatory actions (Awan & Zempi, 2020). This phenomenon is not merely a matter of individual prejudice, but is rooted in socio-political structures that legitimize restrictions on Muslim groups through state regulations and policies. In Southeast Asia, Islamophobia tends to exhibit distinctive characteristics closely linked to colonial histories, ethno-religious conflicts, and geopolitical dynamics (Yusof, 2021). In the context of Southern Philippines, Moro Muslim communities have experienced marginalization since the Spanish and American colonial periods, during which they were positioned as "the other" within a nationalistic narrative oriented toward a Christian majority (Santos, 2020). This historical legacy has shaped cognitive and discursive frameworks that make it easier for the public to accept narratives associating the Moro with security threats.

In this article, Islamophobia is understood as a set of discourses, practices, and institutional policies that represent Islam and Muslims as threats, thereby legitimizing discriminatory actions, excessive surveillance, and restrictions on civil rights. Drawing on Awan and Zempi (2020), Islamophobia is not

conceptualized as an individual prejudice or a collective attitude of Filipino society, but rather as a structural phenomenon operating primarily at the level of the state through security discourses, public policies, and the actions of government authorities. This clarification is crucial to avoid broad generalizations about Filipino society and to situate Islamophobia as a product of power relations within political and security contexts.

In Southern Philippines, the construction of Islamophobia cannot be separated from the dynamics of conflict between the Philippine government and Moro Muslim communities. Since the Spanish and American colonial periods, the Moro have been constructed as "the other" within a Christian-majority–oriented Philippine nationalist narrative, creating a historical legacy of marginalization that continues to be reproduced through state policies (Santos, 2020). This legacy has generated a discursive framework that facilitates the association of Moro Muslim identity with threats to national stability, particularly during periods of conflict and security crises.

The 2017 Marawi siege marked a critical moment that revealed how Islamophobia and conflict dynamics became deeply intertwined. State officials' rhetoric and media coverage consistently linked Moro identity with violent extremism, blurring the distinction between armed groups and the broader Moro Muslim civilian population, thereby reinforcing collective stigma and legitimizing heightened surveillance and restrictive security measures against Moro communities. the Moro Muslim civilian community (Montiel & De Guzman, 2021). These narratives were subsequently translated into extraordinary security policies, such as the expansion of military operations and surveillance practices, which not only responded to conflict but also reshaped conflict dynamics themselves through processes of securitization.

Findings from Human Rights Watch (2022) indicate that during the COVID-19 pandemic, online hate speech targeting Moro communities increased significantly, with framing that blamed Muslims for the spread of the virus in Mindanao. This phenomenon underscores that Islamophobia in Southern Philippines is systemic in nature and functions as a mechanism that reinforces the legitimacy of repressive security policies. In this context, conflict is not understood as a static condition, but rather as a dynamic process that continually evolves through interactions among state policies, identity constructions, and the responses of Moro Muslim communities.

In contrast to previous studies that tend to focus on the Bangsamoro peace process, the institutionalization of BARMM, or the dynamics of armed actors, this article positions itself at the intersection of Islamophobia discourse and post-Marawi conflict dynamics. The research gap addressed by this article lies in the limited number of studies that conceptualize Islamophobia as an active factor that is not merely a consequence of conflict, but also plays a role in shaping the direction, intensity, and persistence of conflict between the Philippine government and Moro communities. Accordingly, this article contributes to a more critical understanding of how security-based discourses and policies influence the challenges of peacebuilding in Southern Philippines.

Dynamic Systems Theory

In the study of International Relations, conflict dynamics refer to non-linear and continuously evolving processes of conflict transformation over time. Conflict dynamics encompass interactions among actors, interests, identities, and structural factors that influence the escalation, transformation, and de-escalation of conflict. This approach is commonly analyzed through Dynamic Systems Theory, which conceptualizes conflict as the outcome of reciprocal relationships among political, social, economic, and security variables that continuously influence one another.

From a dynamic systems perspective, conflict is not understood as a singular event or a static condition, but rather as a process that undergoes changes in form over time. Actors' interests, political motivations, and identity constructions may shift in response to changes in both domestic and

international contexts. Accordingly, conflict dynamics allow for an analysis of how armed conflict can transform into latent forms of conflict, including those based on discrimination, stigmatization, and structural violence, particularly in post–peace agreement contexts.

In the context of Southern Philippines, conflict dynamics between the Philippine government and Moro Muslim communities did not end with the signing of the Bangsamoro agreement. Instead, the conflict has undergone a transformation from overt violence to socio-political tensions characterized by practices of discrimination, marginalization, and non-physical forms of violence. At this stage, Islamophobia is understood as part of the conflict dynamics—that is, as a social and political factor shaping relations between the state and Moro communities in the post-peace period.

In this article, Islamophobia is defined as attitudes, policies, and practices that marginalize Muslim communities through stereotypes, stigma, and unequal treatment, particularly when religious identity is associated with security threats. Within the framework of conflict dynamics, Islamophobia functions as a conflict variable that reinforces social tensions and slows down post-conflict reconciliation processes. These practices do not emerge spontaneously, but are produced through interactions among state policies, security apparatuses, and public discourse.

By employing a conflict dynamics approach, this article positions the Philippine central government and security forces as the primary actors possessing structural capacity to influence the trajectory of post–Bangsamoro Agreement conflict. Security policies, official statements, and law enforcement practices serve as instruments that shape asymmetric relations between the state and Moro communities. Within this dynamic, discrimination is not understood merely as individual action, but rather as part of an ongoing pattern of conflict.

RESEARCH METHODS

This article is based on qualitative research employing a descriptive-analytical approach and specifically utilizes qualitative document analysis as its primary method. This method is chosen because it allows for a systematic examination of meanings, narratives, and constructions of security discourse embedded in official documents, reports, and media products related to Islamophobia and securitization practices targeting Moro Muslim communities in Southern Philippines during the 2020–2024 period.

The criteria for document selection in this study are purposively determined based on several considerations. First, the documents must be substantively relevant to issues of security, Islamophobia, or policies concerning Moro communities. Second, the documents must originate from credible and authoritative sources, such as reports by international human rights organizations (e.g., Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch), official policy documents of the Philippine government, and articles from national and international mainstream media. Third, the documents must be published within the 2020–2024 timeframe to align with the period of analysis. Fourth, the documents must contain narratives, terms, or framing that explicitly or implicitly represent Moro communities within a security threat context.

The corpus of documents analyzed in this study consists of approximately 25–30 documents, including annual and thematic reports by international human rights organizations, official Philippine government policies and statements, and widely circulated online media articles that significantly influence public opinion. This number is considered sufficient for qualitative research, as the primary emphasis lies not on the quantity of documents but on the depth of analysis and the consistency of emergent thematic patterns.

During the analytical process, the documents were coded and categorized into key themes such as threat representation, security policy responses, and the role of the media in securitization processes. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring narrative patterns and their connections to the core components of securitization theory.

The use of qualitative document analysis in this research draws on the approach articulated by Bowen (2009), which emphasizes the systematic analysis of documents as a primary source of qualitative data, and is further reinforced by critical document analysis frameworks within security and discourse studies (Prior, 2014; Balzacq et al., 2021). Research validity was ensured through source triangulation, achieved by comparing findings across different types of documents to ensure consistency and minimize interpretive bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Security Narratives, Stigmatization, and the Role of Media in Reinforcing Islamophobia against Moro Communities (2020–2024

The findings indicate that during the 2020–2024 period, the dynamics of conflict between the state and Moro Muslim communities in Southern Philippines did not come to an end in the post–peace agreement phase, but instead underwent a transformation in the form of conflict. Conflict that was previously manifested through armed violence has shifted into latent forms operating through security policies, institutional practices, and the construction of public discourse. This transformation helps explain how Islamophobia is reproduced and institutionalized as part of post-peace conflict dynamics in Southern Philippines.

First, the findings reveal that terrorism threat framing functions as a key mechanism in sustaining conflict at the structural level. The Philippine government has consistently represented the Mindanao region as a space with a high risk of radicalization, thereby justifying the continued implementation of extraordinary security policies, including during the COVID-19 pandemic (Amnesty International, 2022). From a conflict dynamics perspective, this practice illustrates how Moro identity is constructed as a "risk group," which in turn sustains conflictual relations between the state and local communities despite the establishment of a formal peace framework.

Second, the persistence of such security policies has had direct implications for discriminatory practices within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Human Rights Watch (2023) documents an increase in repressive measures such as arbitrary detention, warrantless searches, and restrictions on civilian mobility. These findings indicate that post-peace conflict does not operate solely at the symbolic level, but is also manifested through concrete policies that deepen power asymmetries and prolong social conflict between the state and Moro communities.

Third, mainstream media play a significant role in reinforcing conflict dynamics through the reproduction of identity-based stereotypes. Patterns of episodic framing that highlight the religious identity of perpetrators of violence without providing the structural context of the conflict reinforce public perceptions of Moro communities as inherently dangerous (Dela Cruz, 2021). Within the framework of conflict dynamics, such media representations contribute to the formation of social attitudes that slow reconciliation processes and strengthen latent identity-based conflict.

Overall, these three findings demonstrate that Islamophobia toward Moro communities is not an incidental or temporary phenomenon, but rather part of a transforming and enduring pattern of conflict within the post–peace agreement context. Islamophobia functions as a socio-political mechanism that reinforces structural tensions, undermines trust-building processes, and delays the consolidation of long-term peace in Southern Philippines. Accordingly, conflict dynamics in the BARMM region must be understood as an ongoing process shaped by interactions among state policies, media representations, and social identity constructions.

Table 1. Mapping of Conflict Dynamics Elements and Manifestations of Islamophobia toward Moro Communities (2020–2024)

Components of conflict dynamics	Description of findings	Forms of emerging islamophobia	Data Sources
Institutional Conflict Actors	The Philippine government, military, and national police play an active role in shaping security policies and narratives in Mindanao	The normalization of repressive policies toward Moro communities as a "legitimate" response to conflict.	Amnesty International (2022); HRW (2023)
State Discursive Practices	Official statements and security policy documents link Moro communities to issues of radicalization and terrorism.	he stigmatization of Moro identity as a "risk group" and as disloyal to the state	Curato (2020); Dela Cruz (2021)
Social Arenas and Conflict Audiences	Filipino society, national media, and international actors serve as arenas for the reproduction and legitimization of conflict narratives.	Public support for military operations and restrictions on civil rights in the BARMM region.	HRW (2023)
Structural Conflict Mechanisms	The implementation of excessive security measures such as military operations, arbitrary detention, mobility restrictions, and information control.	Institutional discrimination and the social and economic marginalization of Moro communities.	Amnesty International (2022); HRW (2023)

The mapping presented in Table 1 demonstrates that conflict dynamics in Southern Philippines form a recurring and mutually reinforcing pattern among state policies, the production of public discourse, and the social experiences of Moro Muslim communities. This pattern operates as a conflict cycle that is difficult to disrupt, in which state institutional actors—particularly the central government, the military, and the police—consistently construct representations of the Moro as a group posing risks to national stability. These representations do not emerge abruptly, but are rooted in the long history of armed conflict in Mindanao, which since the 1970s has framed the region as a problematic space within the political imagination of the Philippine state.

Within this dynamic, state discursive practices play a central role. Official government statements, security reports, and speeches by high-ranking state officials repeatedly link security issues to Moro ethnic and religious identity. Mainstream media then function as social arenas that amplify and normalize these narratives. Through episodic framing mechanisms, incidents of violence or security disturbances are often presented with an emphasis on the religious or ethnic background of perpetrators, while structural factors such as economic inequality, policy failures in development, or local political

dynamics receive limited attention. As a result, both domestic publics and international audiences absorb these conflict narratives as objective realities rather than as socially constructed representations embedded with political interests.

Public acceptance of these conflict narratives has direct implications for the legitimacy of state policies. The resulting social support creates space for the implementation of restrictive security measures in the BARMM region, including the intensification of military operations, restrictions on civilian mobility, heightened administrative surveillance, and discriminatory practices in access to public services and economic activities. These findings indicate that conflict dynamics do not remain confined to the discursive level, but materialize through structural conflict mechanisms that directly affect the everyday lives of Moro communities.

Rather than alleviating tensions, these policies deepen social marginalization and reinforce distrust between local communities and the central government. Within the framework of conflict dynamics theory and conflict transformation, this condition reflects the state's failure to shift from a security-centered approach toward sustainable peacebuilding strategies (Lederach, 2014). In this context, Islamophobia cannot be understood merely as cultural prejudice or individual bias, but rather as an integral component of a conflict structure that is institutionalized through state policies and official discourse.

The role of the media in reproducing this conflict is also highly significant. Analysis of media coverage following security incidents in the BARMM region indicates that the majority of mainstream media headlines explicitly include the labels "Muslim" or "Moro" when the alleged perpetrators are believed to come from these communities (Dela Cruz, 2021). This practice creates implicit associations between religious identity and criminal behavior, while similar incidents involving non-Moro perpetrators are rarely framed using identity-based labels. This pattern aligns with Van Dijk's (2015) concept of the *ideological square*, in which public discourse systematically emphasizes the negative attributes of out-groups while normalizing the dominant position of majority groups.

Furthermore, media framing bias not only shapes public opinion but also influences policy decision-making processes. Human Rights Watch (2023) reports that stigmatizing media coverage of Moro communities is frequently followed by disproportionate policy responses, such as mass arrests or the imposition of emergency measures in specific areas. This underscores that the media function not merely as reflectors of conflict realities, but as co-producers of conflict narratives that contribute to the escalation and reproduction of tensions.

At the same time, the expansion of social media has created spaces of contestation against these dominant discourses. Digital platforms have been utilized by activists, civil society organizations, and representatives of Moro communities to voice everyday experiences, critique state policies, and deconstruct stigmas attached to their identities. The presence of these alternative spaces demonstrates that conflict dynamics are not monolithic and always allow room for resistance, even though mainstream media continue to play a dominant role in shaping public perceptions.

These conflict dynamics are also embedded within an international context. Global discourses surrounding the "war on terror" since the early 2000s have provided external frameworks of legitimacy for states, including the Philippines, to frame domestic conflicts in the language of global security. The resonance of these discourses has facilitated the Philippine government's ability to secure international support and security cooperation, while simultaneously reinforcing political incentives to maintain hardline security approaches in Southern Philippines.

From a historical perspective, this pattern reveals continuity that hinders post-BARMM peacebuilding processes. Although the 2014 peace agreement and the establishment of regional autonomy in 2019 formally opened avenues for reconciliation, policy practices and public discourses continue to reproduce logics of "othering" toward Moro communities. They remain positioned as citizens requiring heightened surveillance rather than as equal political subjects.

Theoretically, these findings enrich conflict dynamics scholarship by demonstrating that conflict reproduction occurs not only through top-down state policies, but also horizontally through media practices and social interactions. Audiences are not always passive; they can act as active agents in reproducing or contesting conflict narratives. However, when biases become widely internalized, social dynamics tend to reinforce existing conflict structures.

Accordingly, this study affirms that Islamophobia in Southern Philippines must be understood as an integral component of institutionalized conflict dynamics, rather than merely as a cultural or psychological phenomenon. A multidimensional approach that integrates conflict dynamics theory, media studies, and domestic as well as international political analysis is crucial to avoid policy responses that merely sustain the status quo. Without efforts to dismantle the discursive foundations and structural conditions of conflict, peace processes in the BARMM region risk remaining trapped in recurring cycles of tension.

Conflict Dynamics as a Mechanism for the Reproduction of Islamophobia in Southern Philippines

When examined through the lens of contemporary conflict dynamics, the findings of this study indicate that the construction of threat toward Moro Muslim communities in Southern Philippines operates not only at the level of state policy, but is also multilayeredly reproduced through public discourse, media representations, educational institutions, and everyday social interactions. From this perspective, Islamophobia is understood not as spontaneously emerging individual prejudice, but as an integral part of a persistent conflict structure (*conflict persistence*) that is institutionalized through political and social practices.

Conflict dynamics theory emphasizes that protracted conflicts are sustained through the interaction of institutional actors, discursive practices, and socially internalized acceptance of conflict narratives (Ramsbotham et al., 2016; Bar-Tal, 2013). In the context of Southern Philippines, the central government, the military, the national police, and segments of local political elites function as institutional conflict actors that consistently frame Mindanao and Moro communities as high-risk spaces. Moments of crisis—such as the COVID-19 pandemic, armed violence incidents, or terrorist threats occurring outside the BARMM region—are instrumentalized to reinforce security narratives that portray Moro communities as problematic groups. Policies such as the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 serve as legal instruments that expand state authority, often with direct implications for Moro communities, even when empirical links to terrorism remain unclear.

State discursive practices within this dynamic are characterized by the repeated use of language that associates Moro identity with potential radicalization. Terms such as *extremist*, *radicalized group*, or *Islamist militant* frequently appear in official statements and policy documents to explain security incidents in Southern Philippines, even when the underlying motives are local political or criminal-economic in nature. This linguistic pattern constructs a symbolic association between Islam and threat, which is then widely reproduced through mainstream media. Dela Cruz (2021) demonstrates that more than 70 percent of headline news coverage of incidents in Mindanao explicitly labels perpetrators as "Muslim" or "Moro," despite the lack of direct relevance of religious identity to the events themselves.

Within the framework of conflict dynamics, the media functions as a social arena of conflict that not only reflects reality but actively shapes public perception. Episodic framing that emphasizes religious identity without structural context reinforces social acceptance of biased conflict narratives. Domestic publics and international audiences subsequently internalize these representations as objective portrayals of the security situation in Southern Philippines. This condition is further reinforced by the resonance of post-9/11 global discourse, which has long linked Islam with security concerns, thereby facilitating the national-level acceptance of identity-based conflict narratives.

Social acceptance of these narratives has direct consequences for policy and practice on the ground. Reports by Amnesty International (2022) and Human Rights Watch (2023) document an increase in military operations, arbitrary arrests, mobility restrictions, and intensified surveillance of mosques, Islamic educational institutions, and civil society organizations in the BARMM region. From a structural conflict perspective, these policies deepen the social and economic marginalization of Moro communities, restrict access to public services, and reinforce political exclusion. In this context, Islamophobia functions as a mechanism of conflict legitimation, enabling structural inequalities to persist with limited resistance from the majority public.

In the long term, this pattern poses a significant obstacle to post-BARMM peacebuilding processes. Although the 2019 Bangsamoro Organic Law formally promises autonomy and reconciliation, biased policy practices and public discourse generate chronic distrust between the central government and Moro society. This distrust is not only political but also social and psychological, as Moro communities continue to be positioned as "high-risk groups" requiring heightened surveillance and control (Alonto, 2022).

This phenomenon is consistent with the concept of conflict institutionalization, namely a condition in which representations of conflict and stigmatization of particular groups have become embedded within policy structures and social practices, making them difficult to change even when objective conditions have shifted (Bar-Tal, 2013). Within this framework, Islamophobia is no longer reactive in nature but instead becomes a permanent element of conflict governance in Southern Philippines. Mainstream media, security policies, and social acceptance mutually reinforce one another in sustaining recurring patterns of conflict.

For the sustainability of peace in the BARMM, this dynamic presents two major risks. First, the reproduction of latent conflict through structural injustices that can be remobilized by political actors. Second, the delegitimization of autonomous institutions when local communities perceive that formal recognition is not accompanied by substantive changes in state treatment. Consequently, breaking this cycle of conflict requires transformations in both discourse and policy, including a shift toward a human security approach and the strengthening of public media literacy to identify biased representations of conflict.

Accordingly, this study underscores that Islamophobia in Southern Philippines must be understood as an integral component of institutionalized conflict dynamics rather than merely a cultural or psychological phenomenon. Without deliberate efforts to dismantle the discursive and policy structures that sustain it, the peace process in the BARMM risks remaining trapped in a recurring cycle of tension.

Political Dynamics, Media, and Identity in the Reproduction of Islamophobia in Southern Philippines

Political dynamics in Southern Philippines from 2020 to 2024 reveal a complex pattern of interaction between state power, identity construction, and the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of the Moro Muslim community. During this period, threat narratives surrounding Moro identity are no longer situational or merely reactive to specific security incidents; instead, they have evolved into a structural mechanism within conflict dynamics that directly affects state policies, governance practices, and intergroup relations in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The resulting relationships tend to be asymmetrical and conflictual, characterized by growing distrust between the Moro community and state security apparatuses, marginalization in policy-making processes, and the reinforcement of social stigma that shapes everyday interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim groups. Within this framework, Islamophobia operates at both institutional and societal levels as part of a persistent conflict structure.

These processes unfold amid a political transition from armed conflict to regional autonomy following the enactment of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 2019. Theoretically, the establishment of BARMM was intended as a power-sharing mechanism to reduce political tensions and build trust between the central government and the Moro community (Gutierrez, 2021). However, findings from several studies indicate that the presence of autonomous structures does not automatically eliminate long-internalized stereotypes and prejudices. Instead, within conflict dynamics that have not been fully transformed, autonomy coexists with strong central control, whereby the national government continues to position itself as the primary actor in defining the boundaries of security legitimacy in the BARMM region. This condition reflects what conflict studies describe as conflict persistence, namely the continuation of conflict patterns despite formal institutional change.

Within this context, the media plays a crucial role as a social arena of conflict that reproduces and normalizes dominant narratives. Analysis of mainstream Philippine media coverage reveals consistent framing patterns that link security incidents to the religious or ethnic identity of perpetrators when those involved are Moro Muslims. A study by Dela Cruz (2021) shows that that during the 2020–2023 period, approximately 73% of headline news related to violent incidents in Mindanao used the labels "Muslim" or "Moro" in their titles, even though there was no evidence that the motives of these incidents were religious in nature. Such framing creates negative associations in the public mind and reinforces perceptions of the Moro community as inherently prone to violence or radicalization.

From the perspective of conflict dynamics, these patterns of representation cannot be separated from state discursive practices that repeatedly situate security issues within identity-based frameworks. Official government statements, security agency reports, and public policies frequently employ language that generalizes security risks to specific groups, particularly in times of crisis such as small-scale violent incidents or violations of health protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. The media then amplifies these narratives, while both domestic and international audiences come to accept them as legitimate explanations. This process illustrates how conflict is simultaneously reproduced through policy, discourse, and social acceptance.

The impact of these dynamics is clearly visible in governance practices and public policies in the BARMM region. Reports by Amnesty International (2022) and Human Rights Watch (2023) document an increase in security operations, detentions without adequate legal procedures, restrictions on civilian mobility, and intensified surveillance of religious activities and Islamic educational institutions. From a structural conflict perspective, these policies not only constrain civil liberties but also generate long-term effects such as social fear, reduced public participation, and a widening gap between the Moro community and state institutions. These conditions reinforce Islamophobia as a mechanism of conflict legitimation, enabling discriminatory practices to persist with minimal public challenge.

Thus, political dynamics in Southern Philippines during the 2020–2024 period demonstrate that Islamophobia cannot be understood merely as an individual bias or a cultural phenomenon. Rather, it constitutes part of an institutionalized conflict structure, produced through the interaction of state policies, media representations, and social acceptance. Without transformation at the level of discourse and policy practice, the existence of BARMM autonomy risks remaining a purely formal change, unable to dismantle the entrenched patterns of conflict and distrust that have long characterized the region.

Table 2. Mapping the Processes of Conflict Dynamics and Their Impacts on Moro Communities in Southern Philippines

Conflict Dynamics Elements	Description in the Southern Philippines Context (2020–2024)	Impacts on Moro Communities
Institutional Conflict Actors	The central government, military, and police as dominant actors in the formulation of security and national stability policies.	The framing of the Moro as a "high-risk" group requiring continuous surveillance.
State Discursive Practices	Official statements, security force press conferences, and public policies that generalize security issues onto specific identities.	The reinforcement of stereotypes and biases based on ethno-religious identity.
Media Arenas and Public Representation	National and international mainstream media reproducing conflict narratives through framing and identity labeling.	The normalization of negative framing and the association between Islam, the Moro, and violence.
Social and Public Reception	Domestic publics and the international community as recipients and disseminators of conflict narratives through public opinion and global discourse.	Limited criticism of discriminatory policies and increased social legitimacy of stigma.
Structural Conflict Mechanisms	Intensive security operations, mobility restrictions, surveillance of religious activities, and administrative control.	Restrictions on civil liberties, economic exclusion, and the deepening of socio-political marginalization.

Source: Author

The mapping presented in the table indicates that conflict dynamics in Southern Philippines operate through a mutually reinforcing cycle involving institutional actors, discursive practices, media representation, and social reception. State actors—particularly the central government, the military, and the police—produce security narratives that frame the Moro community as a high-risk group. These narratives are subsequently reproduced and normalized by mainstream media through identity-based framing, while domestic publics and the international community accept them as legitimate explanations of the security situation. As a result, restrictive policies and governance practices gain social legitimacy, ultimately deepening structural discrimination against the Moro community. Within this framework, Islamophobia does not merely exist as a cultural bias embedded in society, but functions as a political mechanism institutionalized within the structure of conflict.

This process does not unfold linearly; rather, it is cyclical and adaptive to changing political and social contexts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, conflict narratives shifted from terrorism-related concerns to issues of public health. Several media reports and official statements by security

forces disproportionately highlighted violations of health protocols in Muslim-majority areas, with particular emphasis on religious activities such as congregational prayers, Eid al-Fitr celebrations, and Islamic boarding school activities. Meanwhile, similar practices in non-Muslim areas rarely received comparable attention (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In some cases, authorities dispersed religious gatherings, conducted raids, and imposed administrative sanctions under the pretext of health security, reinforcing public perceptions of the Moro community as a source of social and health-related risk (Amnesty International, 2022).

This pattern illustrates how conflict narratives can transform in response to dominant issues without altering their social targets. When armed security threats lose salience, public health concerns serve as a new framework for sustaining negative framing of the Moro community. From a conflict dynamics perspective, this narrative flexibility reflects a mechanism of conflict persistence, whereby representations of certain groups as "problematic" continue to be reproduced despite shifts in the nature of perceived threats. The government employed the legitimacy of public health policy to justify mobility restrictions and increased security presence in specific areas, even though epidemiological data did not indicate higher transmission rates in Moro areas compared to other regions (Santos, 2021).

Beyond crisis contexts, these dynamics are also shaped by electoral political interests. Ahead of the 2022 national elections, security issues in Mindanao re-emerged prominently in the campaign rhetoric of several candidates. Hardline narratives against armed groups in Moro areas were used to construct images of strong leadership while simultaneously appealing to voters in non-Muslim regions who tend to be more responsive to external threat narratives (Reyes, 2022). In this context, security narratives functioned not only as tools of governance but also as instruments of political mobilization. Conflict thus functions not only as a basis for security policy but also as an electoral political strategy that reinforces identity-based polarization.

The impact of these conflict dynamics on the Moro community is multidimensional. From a human security perspective, Islamophobia legitimized through policy and public discourse threatens not only physical security but also economic, social, and cultural security. Moro individuals face barriers in accessing employment in the public sector due to biased background screening processes. In the education sector, students from the Moro community have been reported to experience verbal discrimination and negative stereotyping by both peers and educators in predominantly non-Muslim areas (Ali, 2023). In digital spaces, these stigmas are continuously reproduced through comments, memes, and narratives that associate Moro identity with violence or social noncompliance.

This entire process perpetuates a cycle of distrust between the central government and the Moro community. Although the autonomous structure of BARMM has been institutionalized, biased conflict narratives generate a significant trust deficit. This distrust risks undermining the sustainability of the peace process, as latent conflicts rooted in stereotypes can be readily remobilized by political or security actors with vested interests. Within the framework of conflict dynamics theory, this condition illustrates how institutionalized social representations can sustain conflict despite formal institutional changes.

It is important to note that the Moro community and civil society in Southern Philippines do not passively accept these narratives. Several civil society organizations and alternative media outlets have sought to advance counter-narratives by highlighting the positive contributions of the Moro community to local development and peacebuilding. Initiatives such as dialogue forums and publications by the Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement (MPPM) demonstrate forms of resistance to dominant discourses. However, these efforts are often marginalized due to limited resources and outreach, as well as the dominance of mainstream media in shaping national public opinion.

Accordingly, the deconstruction of Islamophobia within the conflict dynamics of Southern Philippines requires a dual approach: discursive and structural. At the discursive level, the production of alternative narratives that emphasize equality, diversity, and the lived experiences of the Moro

community in a more balanced manner is essential. At the structural level, reforms in security policy, media practices, and state accountability mechanisms are crucial to reducing the institutional biases that sustain conflict. Without transformation at both levels, conflict dynamics will continue to reproduce stigma and impede socio-political integration in Southern Philippines.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the analysis, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of Islamophobia experienced by the Moro Muslim minority in Southern Philippines during the period 2020–2024 is closely linked to conflict dynamics and state institutional practices in framing security issues. The emerging pattern indicates that the Moro community has been consistently represented as a "high-risk" group through official government narratives, public policies, and the reinforcement of discourse by mainstream media. These representations shape public opinion that tends to accept such framing with limited critical scrutiny, resulting in Moro identity being perceived as a potential threat to national stability.

From the perspective of personal security, the stigmatization of Moro identity has generated various discriminatory practices that restrict freedom of movement, economic opportunities, and access to public services. Heightened surveillance policies, mobility restrictions, and the increased presence of security forces—particularly during crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic—have placed the Moro community in an increasingly vulnerable position. This condition demonstrates that the threats attributed to the Moro community are not solely based on factual incidents of violence, but are also constructed through religiously based generalizations and stereotypes that have acquired institutional legitimacy.

In terms of community security, these conflict dynamics reinforce social boundaries between Moro and non-Moro populations, thereby creating an environment that is less conducive to social integration. Although the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) provides an institutional framework for autonomy and conflict management, the persistence of biased security narratives risks undermining public trust in these institutions. As a result, processes of social reconciliation remain slow, and distrust between the central government and the Moro community continues to be sustained.

From the perspective of political security, Islamophobia legitimized through policy and public discourse has shifted policy orientation away from inclusive development toward approaches emphasizing control and stability. The excessive focus on security issues has constrained post-conflict socio-economic development and social cohesion initiatives, including those following the Marawi siege and the establishment of BARMM. The continued reproduction of threat narratives also creates opportunities for identity-based political mobilization, particularly in the context of electoral competition.

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