

Political reforms in the gulf states: Responses from Indonesia

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Article history:

Received: 7 February 2025 / Received in revised form: 24 July 2025 / Accepted: 27 July 2025

Abstract

Over the years, the Gulf Countries have undergone a revolution in political reforms. These reforms promote tolerance and freedom of expression, and empower women, and abandon traditional Islamic values, in favor of more liberal Western ideologies. The reforms also include empowering women, limiting the authority of the religious police, and promoting moderate Islam. This study elaborates on how the Indonesian government and Muslim figures responded to political reforms. Using a qualitative method, this study collected secondary data from online sources and analyzed the Indonesian government and figures responses to the religious reforms in the Gulf countries. The study found an enthusiastic response from the government level to the reforms through regular visits and event collaboration between Indonesia and the Gulf especially with Saudi Arabia. On the one hand, Muslim figures responded less enthusiastically with only limited comments from different Islamic groups in Indonesia.

Keywords: Gulf countries; Indonesian government; Indonesian figures; political reforms

1. Introduction

In recent years, political reform has become a new phenomenon in the Gulf countries, especially in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The shift in the role of religion in Gulf countries has garnered global attention. The Gulf countries, known for their strong Islamic culture, are transforming into more moderate nations. In particular, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are beginning to open up to liberal Western ideologies " (Lacroix, 2019). Their governments advocate tolerance, freedom of expression, and gender equality, thereby sidelining Islam's primary role in nation building. This phenomenon is inseparable from the role of the West and its liberal ideologies, making the entry of Western influence into the Middle East the starting point for the changes experienced by Arab countries. The blending of Arab and Western cultures has influenced the education curricula and lifestyle of the people there (Qurtuby, 2023). This project was initiated as an alternative to state income that solely relies on oil proceeds, indicating a continuous decline in oil revenues (Machmudi, 2020).

Political reformation has sparked various responses, within and outside the Gulf countries in which some agree with certain aspects of the reforms, while others disagree, even condemn them (Alhussein, 2018; Pilotti et al., 2021). Saudi clerics are particularly concerned that these reforms, which will lead to the loss of traditional Islamic values in the country's culture. They

view these changes to violate religious teachings and could threaten the social and political stability of Saudi Arabia (Abdurrohman et al., 2023).

This study examined the Indonesian response to the reform. As a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia has a strong historical, theological, and symbolic ties to the Gulf Countries particularly Saudi Arabia as the birthplace of Islam and the center of Hajj activities every year. In addition, many Indonesian Islamic figures and organizations have long referenced Saudi Arabia in religious practice and destination for education, especially after the rise of Salafi da'wah activities in Indonesia (Qurtuby and Aldamer 2018). The close relationship between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia coupled with the religious reforms have given rise to their unique dynamics among Indonesian Muslims, ranging from enthusiastic acceptance to critical response. This study aims to analyze how the Indonesian government and Muslim figures responded to political reforms in Gulf Countries.

2. Methodology

This study employed qualitative research method that focuses on literature analysis. To investigate the evolving religion in Saudi Arabia, the author compiled data from various scholarly sources, government publications, and news sources. Furthermore, this study incorporated the Indonesian government's response to the Saudi reforms. It used the concept of bilateral diplomacy, meaning an effort to establish peaceful relations between two countries through the official representatives who advocate for each country's political,

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<https://doi.org/10.21924/chss.5.1.2025.92>

economic, social, cultural interests (Rozental & Buenrostro, 2013). Several activities are carried out in this bilateral diplomatic process, including, representing the sending countries in the receiving countries; protecting the interests of the sending country in the receiving country; negotiating with the receiving country's government, reporting to the sending country's government about the conditions and developments in the receiving country, and promoting friendly relations between sending and receiving countries, and building their economic, cultural and scientific ties (Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961, 1961)

3. Results and Discussion

The Gulf region, especially Saudi Arabia, is the center of the Islamic religion. As the host of the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia plays an important role in Islamic life. One of the five pillars of Islam is the Hajj, which all Muslims must perform in Mecca, the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad. Every year, millions of Muslim pilgrims from all over the world come to Mecca to complete this pilgrimage. Mecca also serves as a destination for Umrah, a year-round religious pilgrimage. The Grand Mosque, located in Mecca, is one of the most important symbols in Islam. It is the spiritual center of the entire Muslim world, and many people want to see it. Muslims use the Kaaba, considered as the house of Allah, for prayer in the Grand Mosque. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) lived in Medina, the second holy city in Saudi Arabia, after emigrating from Mecca. The Prophet's Mosque, an important place of worship, holds the Prophet's burial site. Many Muslims visit Medina as part of their pilgrimage to Mecca to pay their respects at the Prophet's tomb.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have actively engaged in Islamic diplomacy, particularly in resolving disputes in the Middle East. These two countries have played a key role in resolving conflicts in the region, including the Arab-Israeli conflict. They promote peace and stability in the Middle East, which is the common goal of Muslims worldwide. Additionally, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have funded various religious initiatives worldwide. They have established mosques, Islamic schools, and charitable institutions in various locations to support the education and development of Muslims. These projects often reflect Islamic values, such as zakat (charitable donations) and Muslim solidarity. These two countries have also participated in organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to encourage cooperation among Muslim countries in areas such as economics, education, and humanitarianism. However, the diplomatic roles of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have faced widespread criticism. Critics argue that political and economic factors, rather than religious ones, sometimes influence diplomatic efforts. Also, their policies and actions in the Gulf region, such as the conflict in Yemen and the Qatar crisis, have caused tension among Muslims (Rimapradesi and Surwandono, 2022).

As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia has many ties with different Gulf countries. These ties have influenced the religious knowledge, customs, and culture in the country. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have financially supported the development of Islam

in Indonesia. One of their greatest contributions was constructing a magnificent mosque. Saudi Arabia's financial assistance has helped in building one of the largest mosques in Southeast Asia: the Istiqlal Mosque in Jakarta. King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud bestowed the Istiqlal Mosque, a center of worship for Indonesian Muslim worshipers and an important symbol of Islam in the country (Mehden, 2014). Saudi Arabia also supports Islamic education in Indonesia through the provision of scholarship programs and financial assistance to Indonesian students seeking to pursue religious education in Saudi Arabia. These programs have facilitated hundreds of Indonesian students to better understand Islam and broaden their horizons abroad. These programs have also contributed to the enhancement of relations between Indonesia and Gulf countries, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of Islam (Kovacs, 2014).

The relationship between post-independence Saudi Arabia and Indonesia is quite close. Muhammad Natsir founded the Indonesian Islamic Da'wah Council (DDII), an organization in collaboration with Saudi Arabia to facilitate students to study in Saudi universities. Through the DDII, LIPIA (the Institute for Islamic and Arabic Language Sciences) was founded in 1981. Through LIPIA, a number of figures such as Yazid Jawwas, Farid Okbah, Abu Bakar M. Altway, Jafar Umar Talib, and Yusuf Uthman Ba'isa spread Saudi Salafism ideas to Indonesia (Jahroni, 2020). In addition to LIPIA, Saudi Arabia regularly provides scholarships for Indonesian students studying there. Upon their return to Indonesia, these alumni became actively involved in preaching, establishing various communities, and spreading their message through various media platforms, such as television and online platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. However, Salafi teachings are regarded as strict and different from other religious traditions in Indonesia, especially among Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), leading to conflict between these two groups (Aswar, 2019).

Regarding Saudi political reforms and their relationship with Indonesia, there have been reciprocal visits between two nations since 2017 to discuss religious attitudes and religious reforms in both countries. The Indonesian government has consented to collaborate with the Saudi Arabian government in combating radicalism through an agreement contained in one of the memoranda of understanding signed by the two countries during Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud's state visit in the same year. Indonesia and Saudi Arabia also agreed to prioritize the moderate face of Islam and the position of Islam that must contribute to maintain and protect world civilization (Kuwado, 2017).

In 2020, the Indonesian government, represented by The Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, paid a visit to Saudi Arabia and met with the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology (Etidal). The visit highlighted opportunities for collaboration between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia in promoting moderate Islamic values and countering extremism. During the meeting, Etidal representative Mansour Alshammari appreciated the moderate development of Islam in Indonesia and the harmonious interfaith relations in the country. Alshammari acknowledged that Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, serves as a positive example for other countries in

terms of tolerance and social harmony. The Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Mahfud MD also expressed his appreciation for Etidal's performance in preventing the spread of extremism and the recruitment of members of extremist groups in various parts of the world. He emphasized the significance of international collaboration in addressing the threat posed by radical ideologies to global peace (Yahya & Rastika, 2020).

In addition, Mahfud MD and his entourage convened with Rabithah Alam Islami (Islamic World League). During the meeting, the Secretary General of Rabithah Alam Islami, Sheikh Abdul Karim Al-Issa, expressed high appreciation for the commitment of Indonesia as the largest Muslim country to promote moderate and inclusive Islam. He also expressed his openness to the prospect collaboration with Indonesia in promoting the image of Islam as *rahmatan lil alamin* on the global stage. The Indonesian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Agus Maftuh Abegebriel, who was also present at both meetings, said that bilateral relations between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia have the potential to develop further, particularly in the context of strengthening cooperation in the religious sphere. He highlighted the spirit of religious reform that Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman is instigating through Vision 2030, which includes the transformation of religious thought in Saudi Arabia towards a more moderate and tolerant direction (Yahya & Rastika, 2020).

In 2021, Minister of Religious Affairs Yaqut Cholil Qoumas visited Saudi Arabia and met with the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Dawah, and Guidance of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdullatif bin Abdulaziz, in Mecca. They discussed plans to enhance collaboration between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, including issues related to promoting religious moderation (Kemenag Nganjuk 2021). The meeting was followed by the "2nd ASEAN Countries Conference in Indonesia 2022" on religious moderation, a collaboration between the Indonesian government and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with the theme of "Khaira Ummah" (Goodness for the Ummah). The event was attended by 140 participants from ASEAN countries, featuring speakers, including leaders of Islamic organizations, religious figures, and academics from Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Timor-Leste, and Saudi Arabia (Kemenag, 2022).

The 10 recommendations were made at the conference: strengthening cooperation and synergy between ASEAN countries and Saudi Arabia on religious issues and the dissemination of Religious Moderation (*Wasathiyatul Islam*); preventing wrongdoing (*nahi munkar*) in a good manner and addressing various elements threatening national integrity, including being vigilant against the infiltration and spread of extremist ideologies and terrorism, as well as combating all forms of hoaxes, lies, misinformation, and intolerance; and Prioritizing *Wasathiyatul Islam* as a practice of moderate, tolerant, and just religious belief that deserves to be advocated internationally as a solution to the threats posed by humanitarian conflicts in the global world (NU Online, 2022).

In 2022, the Indonesian government, through Vice President K.H. Makruf Amien, convened a meeting with the Minister of Islamic Affairs, Da'wah, and Extension Service of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, H.E. Abdullatif bin Abdulaziz

Al-Syaikh, in Jakarta. During the meeting, the Vice President supported the Government of Saudi Arabia in taking a leading position in pioneering the *Wasathiyah* Islamic movement. In this meeting, the Vice President also conveyed the historical relationship between Indonesian scholars who previously studied religion in Saudi Arabia and subsequently applied it in Indonesia with a diverse community background through peaceful mean. Among them there were also those who became fighters to combat the colonizers (Jingga, 2022).

In January 2023, a number of prominent Saudi scholars attended the Forum of Alumni of Saudi Arabian Universities in ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific region in Jakarta. Notable attendees included Sheikh Dr. Saleh bin Humaid, the Imam and Khatib of Masjidil Haram, and, Prince Dr. Mamdouh bin Saud bin Tsunayyan Al Saud, the Rector of the Islamic University of Madinah. Alumni from Saudi Arabian universities in the ASEAN and Asia-Pacific regions who have become religious scholars or public officials also attended the forum. The Saudi scholars in the forum underscored that what is taught in Saudi Arabia and what will continue to be disseminated is a moderate Islam, an Islam that loves its nation and country, an Islam that benefits people, humanity, nation, and country at best and is a mercy to all worlds, far from all forms of terrorism, radicalism, and extremism. Hidayat Nur Wahid, representing Saudi Arabian alums and currently serving as a member of the Indonesian People's Consultative Assembly (DPR RI), conveyed the role of Saudi Arabian alums in Indonesia in spreading religious moderation, disseminating Islam as a mercy to all worlds, and correcting all religious behaviors that tend toward takfiri, intolerance, radicalism, and extremism, which are not taught in Saudi Arabia. Wahid insisted that these meetings must be followed up because people will increasingly realize that Islam is a mainstream religion that can bring about moderation and correct all forms of extremism. Also, such meetings are important in Indonesia and should be organized in other countries where alumni are present. It is clear that Saudi Arabian alumni from various countries worldwide are spreading the same understanding—moderate Islam, Islam that is not terrorist or radical, but Islam that brings mercy to all worlds, loves its nation and country, and advances world civilization (MPR RI, 2023).

In 2024, the Directorate General of Islamic Guidance of the Ministry of Religion, Kamaruddin Amin, received a visit from the Deputy Minister of Islamic Affairs, Da'wah and Guidance of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) Sheikh Dr. Awad bin Sabti Al Anzi. The meeting clearly defined the roles of Indonesia and Saudi Arabia in the Islamic world. The two countries made a firm agreement to ensure that the da'wah delivered to the community is moderate and tolerant. Sheikh Awad also explained that Indonesia-Saudi Arabia bilateral relations are unquestionably strengthening. One of them is Indonesia's participation by sending a delegation to the international-level Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ) held by the Saudi Arabian government. In addition, a Musabaqah Hifzhil Qur'an (MHQ) is held in Indonesia in collaboration with the Saudi Arabian government (Kemenag, 2024).

In 2025, at the start of his leadership, during his state visit to Jeddah, President Prabowo together with the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), officially established the

Indonesia-Saudi Supreme Coordination Council (DKT). Within this DKT structure, President Prabowo appointed Prof. Dr. Nasaruddin Umar, Minister of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia and Grand Imam of the Istiqlal Mosque, to the working team. This appointment marks an expansion of the direction of the two countries' partnership, not only in the fields of economy, industry, and employment, but also in the religious, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of cross-national relations. One of the DKT's plans is to construct the Indonesian Hajj Village as a permanent service center for pilgrims and a showcase of Indonesian culture in the Holy Land. This strategic partnership adopts a high-level cooperation model Saudi Arabia has only had with countries such as the United States and the People's Republic of China. In other words, Indonesia is one of the few Southeast Asian countries with bilateral relations on par with Riyadh. Prof. Dr. Hannani, Rector of IAIN Parepare, responded to the expansion of this cooperation by positively welcoming Prof. Nasaruddin Umar's involvement in the DKT as a form of global recognition of moderate Islam or Wasathiyyah Islam, which Indonesia has built and fought for (Humas IAIN Parepare, 2025).

In response to the political reforms in the Gulf countries, Islamic organizations in Indonesia, including figures, have not been very active. One response came from Nahdlatul Ulama through a meeting in 2017 between the Chairman of the Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) KH Said Aqil Siroj and the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Usamah bin Muhammad. During the meeting, Said Aqil Siradj, expressed his appreciation for Saudi Arabia's political reform and hoped that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would commit to developing moderate Islam beginning with respecting and guaranteeing freedom of madhhab to all Muslims around the world performing Hajj and Umrah in Haram Land. Usamah bin Muhammad responded it by conveying the commitment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in developing moderate Islam (NU Online, 2017).

Various investigations have yielded only a few responses such as the intellectual writing of Nahdlatul Ulama, Zuhairi Misrawi (2021), who appreciates Saudi reforms as a form of Saudi *ijtihad* in addressing various contemporary issues in Saudi society (Misrawi, 2021a). In another of his writings, Zuhairi Misrawi explained that Saudi reform efforts could be an opportunity for significant cooperation between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia to promote the idea of moderate Islam to the world in the future, given the potential of both countries. This moderation can help counter the expansion of transnational Islamic ideas and movements (Misrawi, 2021b), such as ISIS.

Another intellectual, Sumanto al-Qurtuby (2023) responded positively to Saudi reforms through Vision 2030. In an article published in the Indonesian media, Kompas, al-Qurtuby explained various aspects of the Saudi reform, including the religious field, which has transformed from highly conservative to be more progressive (Qurtuby, 2023). On the one hand, Muhammadiyah and its figures or intellectuals have not provided a specific response to the religious reforms in Saudi Arabia. The only response to this matter was featured in the *Suara Muhammadiyah* magazine, explaining the dynamics of the relationship between Saudi modernization and Salafi scholars, including during the era of Muhammad bin Salman. The article describes how Saudi Arabia's economic conditions

have compelled the country to undergo increasingly liberal changes (Suara Muhammadiyah 2020).

An Indonesian Salafi figure, Firanda Andirja responded to the reforms in Saudi Arabia by acknowledging the mistakes in the reforms, such as the widespread opening of cinemas and allowing women to attend football matches. However, according to Firanda, the Saudi government still prohibits places for adultery and alcohol consumption. Despite these shortcomings, Firanda believed that Saudi Arabia is the best country because it is the only nation built upon the Quran and Sunnah. He viewed some of Saudi Arabia mistakes as understandable efforts to cope with global pressures from various foreign countries. He believed this is based on religious principles, prioritizing the lesser harm to avoid the greater harm (Paras Muslim Tv, 2022).

The most significant responses to the issue of Saudi reforms come from the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia community, as published on the Media Umat website. Despite its dissolution in 2017, in terms of disseminating ideas through the media, the movement remains active in Indonesia. In mainstream and other Islamic media, Media Umat is the most frequent respondent to policy changes in Saudi Arabia. One comment, for example, came from Farid Wadjdi, explaining that the Saudi religious reform was a form of foolishness by Muhammad Bin Salman. Farid argued that distancing Islam from politics and the state would damage the social and religious order in Saudi Arabia, which is what the West desires for the Islamic world. He believed that, the liberalization of Saudi Arabia will only strengthen American colonization in Saudi Arabia in all its aspects, which has been dominant in Saudi Arabia economically and politically. Saudi Arabia can only rise if Islam is the primary guide in building the country, rather than not secularism, liberalism, or nationalism (Media Umat, 2022).

There are two aspects to consider in Indonesia's response to reforms in Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia. First, relations between the Indonesian and Saudi governments have increased, particularly from 2017 to 2023. Several meetings have taken place involving figures from Islamic organizations, including Nahdlatul Ulama. Joint conferences have also been conducted to strengthen cooperation on moderation programs between the two countries. Politically, this collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia is reasonable, considering the threat of transnational Islamic political movements that both countries face. Post-reform, Indonesia faces similar challenges. Consequently, the Indonesian government collaborates with Islamic organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, to develop and disseminate moderate ideas at the community level through educational institutions, Islamic boarding schools, and youth organizations. Saudi Arabia is dealing with similar issues in the Middle East, giving rise to Islamic political movements with political visions that threaten its existence. However, at the civil society level, the response to Saudi reforms is varied but not particularly widespread, especially among NU, Muhammadiyah, and other Muslim reformist groups. This is understandable given that Indonesia has not experienced significant issues related to religious reform since political reform (Reformasi 1998).

The collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Indonesia to develop the idea of moderate Islam continues to benefit both countries. Saudi Arabia has significant funds to strengthen

moderation efforts. Additionally, educational reforms in Saudi Arabia can lead to the emergence of more moderate Salafi preachers in Indonesia. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population globally and play an active role in various international forums. Moreover, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah are the two largest Islamic organizations in the world, with tens of millions of members in Indonesia alone. This collaboration is highly strategic for Saudi Arabia, which is collaborating to develop moderate Islam to counter the global influence of Islamist movements.

4. Conclusion

Political reforms in the Gulf Countries including Saudi Arabia signifies a pivotal stages in the process of Arab modernization. These reform possesses both internal and international consequences. Internally in Saudi, they are targeted at modernizing Saudi society by allowing a modern interpretation of Islam, improving gender equality, and diversifying the economy from its reliance on oil. The lifting of the policy against women driving, revising school curricula, and sponsoring cultural events all reveal how Saudi Arabia attempts to align itself with international standards while maintaining its Islamic identity.

At the governmental level, Indonesia welcomes the religious moderation initiated by the Saudi government. This fact is exemplified by the various meetings between the two parties. However, it is divided at the grassroots and intellectual levels. On one hand, the parties view opportunities for partnership in Saudi Arabia's efforts toward moderation in the spread of moderate Islam throughout the world - for instance, Nahdlatul Ulama. Others, however, embrace doubt, as seen in the potential cultural shift to directly reject modernization programs perceived as a catalyst for Western influence on Islamic beliefs. In pursuit of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's path of mixing tradition and modernization will have an impact on the global discussion about Islamic reform and changes within the place of Islam in the world.

This study contributes to the political reform of the Gulf States, particularly in Saudi Arabia, and the responses of the Indonesian government and figures in the context of the 2030 vision. further research should compare the responses of various Muslim-majority countries, such as Southeast Asia or other Muslim countries. It is imperative to understand the response of the Islamic world's public to this issue since Saudi Arabia is regarded as the Mecca of Muslims worldwide, with great religious attraction for Muslims. The emergence of discourses related to this matter worldwide is expected to be a forum for mutual inspiration or mutual learning, thereby strengthening the relationship between the Muslim community, especially Indonesia and the Gulf states.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my appreciation to Auliya Eka Safitri, Nazila Al Fayed, and Silvia Jultikasari Febrian of the Department of International Relations, Universitas Islam Indonesia, for their contributions toward research data collection.

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