



Muslim Representation and Inclusive Governance in Southwest Papua's Special Autonomy Era

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Abstract

This article examined the unequal political representation of Muslims within the bureaucracy and legislature of Southwest Papua during the Special Autonomy era, despite their comprising a substantial share of the province's population. Addressing the limited scholarly attention to minority political negotiation within asymmetrical autonomy regimes, this study explored how Muslim political participation extended beyond formal representation through what was conceptualized as compensatory participation – the mobilization of non-electoral channels and social capital to sustain political influence. Employing a qualitative descriptive-exploratory design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving Muslim actors in the bureaucracy, religious organizations, and civil society, and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings revealed persistent underrepresentation in the Regional House of Representatives and strategic bureaucratic positions, alongside evidence that Muslim actors built political influence through education, religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, and interfaith dialogue, despite recurring resistance framed around Islamization narratives. The article argued that inclusive governance in Southwest Papua emerged from the interplay of formal representation, bureaucratic performance, and interfaith social capital, positioning compensatory participation as a key mechanism through which minority groups expanded political influence while maintaining social cohesion.

A. Introduction

A striking asymmetry defines governance in special autonomous regions of Indonesia: policies designed to protect the political and cultural standing of indigenous populations can, in practice, leave other numerically significant communities institutionally under-represented within the very structures meant to promote inclusive governance. Southwest Papua illustrates this asymmetry sharply. Long framed in both public discourse and scholarship as a predominantly Christian region, Papua's governance architecture—built around Special Autonomy, affirmative recruitment, and indigenous protection mechanisms—rarely accounts for the presence and political agency of non-Christian minorities, including Muslims, who nonetheless constitute a substantial share of the population in several of its provinces (Edward & Nganyi, 2025; Hazaymeh, 2025; Tomić, 2023). This omission is not merely an empirical oversight; it exposes a structural blind spot in how inclusive governance is theorized and measured in asymmetric autonomy regimes.

Southwest Papua makes this blind spot concrete. Muslims form the second-largest religious group in the province, accounting for 37.70 percent of a total population of 632,788—behind Protestants at 54.94 percent (Satu Data Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2025)—yet their institutional footprint tells a markedly different story: only 8 of 35 seats in the Regional House of Representatives and 9 of 26 echelon II bureaucratic positions are held by Muslims. The disjuncture between demographic weight and formal political power is too large to be incidental; it signals a systemic feature of how asymmetric institutional arrangements such as Special Autonomy distribute access to the state, and it raises a question that existing scholarship has yet to adequately confront: how does inclusive democracy actually function when affirmative protections for one group coexist with the marginalization of another within the same governance framework (Al-Hamid, 2013; Kopec, 2025)?

Existing scholarship on Muslim political participation offers only partial answers to this question, and largely from vantage points that do not fit the Papuan case. National-level studies in Indonesia have mapped the ideological diversity of Muslim political attitudes into clusters—Fundamentalist, Nationalist, Apolitical, Hijrah, Moderate, and Progressive—explained through psychological drivers such as right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (Istiqomah et al., 2022; Umbar et al., 2025). This literature illuminates individual-level political orientation but says

little about how minority Muslims negotiate power in localities where they are demographically peripheral rather than dominant. A parallel body of work documents a broader shift from formal political engagement toward sociocultural Islamism, in which moral and civic expression substitutes for institutional politics (Sakai & Fauzia, 2014), while studies of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama position these organizations as pragmatic actors adapting to socio-economic change and global integration (Williams, 2017; Said et al., 2026).

Taken together, these strands converge on a national or organizational scale that treats Muslim political behavior as either an aggregate attitudinal phenomenon or an elite organizational strategy, leaving unexamined the ground-level mechanisms through which ordinary Muslim actors—bureaucrats, teachers, community leaders—translate limited electoral standing into functioning political influence within a specific, autonomy-governed locality.

This is precisely the gap that Southwest Papua exposes but that current research has not filled. No study to date has systematically examined how a Muslim minority navigates political participation within a governance regime explicitly structured around the protection of a different identity group—one where autonomy provisions, rather than being neutral, actively encode boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The absence of empirical attention to this setting leaves the relationship between special autonomy policy, minority participation, and inclusive governance outcomes theoretically underspecified: existing frameworks can describe minority participation in majoritarian-liberal contexts, but they offer little purchase on participation under conditions of institutionalized affirmative asymmetry (Edward & Nganyi, 2025; Kopec, 2025).

This article addresses that gap by conceptualizing Muslim political participation in Southwest Papua as a form of engagement that operates simultaneously through and around formal political channels—shaped by the interaction between religious values, civic identity, and the structural constraints of an autonomy regime not designed with this minority in mind (Tomić, 2023). Participation, in this framing, extends beyond electoral involvement to encompass the deliberate use of bureaucratic professionalism, educational institutions, and interfaith networks as alternative sites of influence (Edward & Nganyi, 2025; Kopec, 2025; Hazaymeh, 2025). This reconceptualization constitutes the study's central contribution: rather than treating limited electoral representation as a terminus of minority political agency, it identifies the compensatory mechanisms through which such

agency is reconstituted elsewhere in the institutional landscape—a dimension that macro-level studies of Muslim political attitudes and organizational pragmatism have not captured. The novelty of this approach lies not in its geographic setting alone, but in its analytical move to read bureaucratic and civic participation as substantive political action within, rather than despite, an asymmetric autonomy framework.

Empirically, these dynamics surface across several registers: electoral participation through voting and legislative representation (Ahmed, 2024; Sayuti et al., 2026), non-electoral engagement via civil society activism and political philanthropy (Azabar & Aelst, 2024), digital participation in policy discourse (Rohid et al., 2025), and policy advocacy through formal lobbying (Gelbman, 2025). In Southwest Papua, these forms converge in the activities of Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Islamic educational institutions, which extend into social service provision, interfaith dialogue, and human resource development—practices that simultaneously generate support and provoke resistance, revealing local bureaucracy as a contested arena where actors must strategically balance institutional neutrality against the advancement of inclusive governance (Edward & Nganyi, 2025). Within this landscape, Special Autonomy functions not only as a mechanism of administrative devolution but as an instrument for recognizing collective identity and managing diversity in Papua, operationalized through affirmative recruitment policies, fiscal decentralization, and institutions such as the Papuan People's Assembly (Bertrand, 2014; Devetak, 2018; Neagu & Klatt, 2025; Reumi, 2025)—an architecture that simultaneously opens and constrains space for minority participation, including that of Muslims.

Building on this argument, the present study examines three interrelated questions: (1) the forms through which Muslim political participation manifests in Southwest Papua; (2) how Muslim representation is practiced within the local bureaucracy; and (3) the opportunities available for strengthening Muslim contributions to regional political development. In addressing these questions, this article advances understanding of how minority groups navigate affirmative governance structures, and contributes to broader debates on inclusive governance, political representation, and minority participation in plural, asymmetrically governed societies.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-exploratory design to examine patterns of Muslim political participation in local governance in Southwest Papua Province,

focusing on how Muslim actors engage with bureaucratic and political institutions within a predominantly non-Muslim sociopolitical environment. Conducted over a six-month period (January–June 2025), the research examined forms of participation, representation practices, and the structural and cultural factors shaping Muslim involvement in regional governance, with particular attention to power relations, institutional arrangements, and intergroup interactions that influence inclusive governance.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, limited participant observation, and document analysis. Seven key informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in government institutions, community leadership, and interreligious relations in Southwest Papua, comprising provincial government officials, Muslim community leaders, and non-Muslim community figures. Interviews explored informants' experiences of participation, perceptions of representation and inclusion, challenges encountered in governance processes, and strategies employed to strengthen engagement in regional development. Participant observation was conducted during government meetings, public forums, and community activities to document patterns of interaction, decision-making processes, and relationships among actors. These primary sources were complemented by document analysis covering Special Autonomy regulations, regional policy documents, development plans, demographic statistics, government reports, academic publications, and relevant media sources.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials were reviewed repeatedly and coded thematically to identify recurring patterns related to bureaucratic representation, political participation, identity negotiation, social capital, and inclusive governance. Findings from different sources were systematically compared through thematic matrices to identify convergences and discrepancies across data sets. Trustworthiness was ensured through source and method triangulation, member checking with selected informants, and the maintenance of an audit trail comprising field notes, coding records, and analytical memos—procedures that enhanced the credibility, consistency, and transparency of the findings while minimizing potential researcher bias.

All informants received a clear explanation of the research objectives and their rights, and voluntarily provided informed consent prior to interviews and observations, with the freedom to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality was

maintained by anonymizing identifying details in the findings and securely storing all recordings, transcripts, and field notes, with access restricted to the research team. Given the politically and religiously sensitive nature of the topic, particular care was taken to represent informants' views accurately and to avoid any use of data that could expose participants to social or professional risk. The research protocol was reviewed and approved in accordance with applicable ethical research guidelines.

C. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussion in a systematic manner, organized around three interrelated themes concerning Muslim representation and inclusive governance during Southwest Papua's Special Autonomy era: the demographic composition of the population by religion, the extent and character of Muslim involvement in the regional bureaucracy, and the broader contributions of Muslim actors within the Special Autonomy framework. The discussion that follows builds on these findings to examine the imbalance in Muslim representation, situating it within the affirmative design of Special Autonomy that prioritizes Indigenous Papuans, and to explain how this imbalance is offset through inclusive bureaucratic practice and the mobilization of social capital.

1. Results

a. Religious Composition in Southwest Papua

The composition of the population in Southwest Papua shows significant religious diversity and is one of the socio-cultural characteristics in the land of Cendrawasih. As of 2024, the population of Southwest Papua is recorded at around 632,788 people, with the composition of the population being Protestant (54.94%), Catholic (7.10%), Islam (37.70%), Hindu (0.09%), Buddhist (0.08%), and others (0,006%).

This demographic pattern reflects a plural religious landscape in which different faith communities coexist within the same social and cultural space. Such diversity is important for understanding the broader context of social interaction, community relations, and educational practices in Southwest Papua. The religious composition also indicates that any discussion of cultural identity, social cohesion, or educational development in the region should take into account the heterogeneous character of its population. The distribution of religious adherents in Southwest Papua is visually presented in Figure 1.

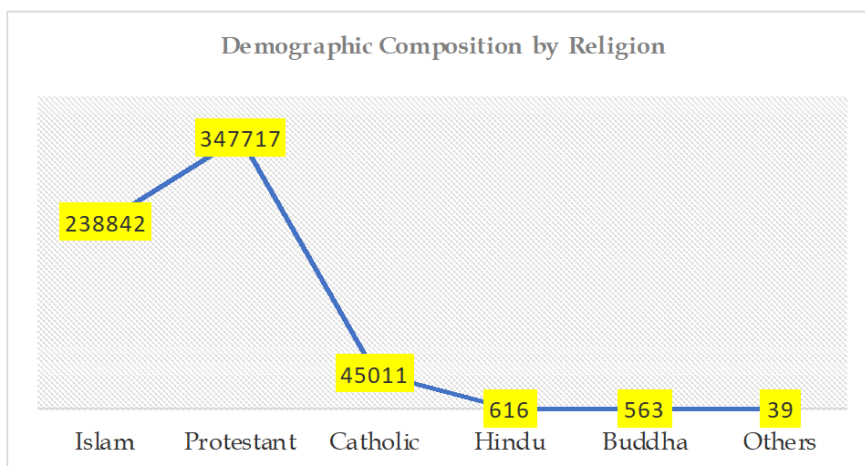


Figure 1. Demographic Composition by Religion
 Source: Processed from Satu Data,
 The Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2025.

This distribution shows that Southwest Papua Province has two religions that are predominantly embraced by the population, namely Christianity and Islam. The dominance of the existence of these two religious groups is not only seen from the aspect of adherents, but also complete religious facilities such as houses of worship and educational institutions from the lower to the higher levels. Demographically, the existence of adherents of religions in this area does not reside in one specific location. They live in integrated settlements with adherents of other religions from various ethnicities such as Javanese, Batak, Toraja, Bugis, Makassar, Ambon, Buton, Minang, and so on.

The religious structure shows the two dominant groups Protestants (54.94%) and Muslims (37.70%), but the representation of Muslims in formal channels is not proportional to their demographic weight. In the DPRP, only 8 out of 35 (22.9%) seats were occupied by Muslims, while in the second echelon of the province 9 out of 27 (33.3%). This pattern indicates a sharper under-representation in the legislative realm (-15.3 percentage points) than in the bureaucracy (-4.9 percentage points). Substantively, this inequality explains why Muslim political influence is not solely supported by electoral channels but seeks compensation through non-electoral channels and public services that have a more direct impact on citizens. To understand how these inequalities are produced and negotiated at the practical level, it is necessary to examine the role of bureaucracy as a space for interaction between communities.

Figure 1 above shows that the composition of the population based on religion in a region generally includes three important aspects. *First*, the proportion of the majority and minority determines demographic dominance and influences the political representation and public policy of a region or region. *Second*, geographic distribution and territorial concentration, where certain religious groups are often concentrated in certain areas so that they form pockets of homogeneity or heterogeneity often influence social interaction and potential conflicts. *Third*, the picture also shows the dynamics of change and social mobility that have an impact on development planning, education, and diversity management. These three aspects are interrelated and are an important basis for understanding social structure and its implications for the social life of people in areas with a multicultural character.

b. Muslim Involvement in Regional Bureaucracy

Muslim representation in politics can be seen through their involvement in the provincial bureaucracy. Several Muslim figures occupy strategic positions at the echelon II level, including heads of offices, bureaus, agencies, and other senior administrative units. Their positions are closely related to their professional careers, bureaucratic experience, and institutional responsibilities within the provincial government. Although they do not formally represent particular religious groups, their presence as Muslim officials remains significant in the socio-religious context of Southwest Papua. Their involvement in the bureaucracy may indirectly strengthen the visibility and participation of Muslim communities in public institutions. However, the roles they perform are not intended to serve the interests of specific religious groups, since their authority and administrative responsibilities cover the entire population regardless of religious affiliation.

Within the provincial government, Muslims therefore occupy a visible and strategic position in the administrative structure. Personnel data in 2025 show that 9 echelon II positions are occupied by Muslims, while 18 are held by non-Muslims, out of a total of 27 positions. These consist of heads of service (12), expert staff (4), government assistants (3), secretary of the Papuan People's Assembly (1), heads of bureau (4), heads of agency (2), and secretary of the council (1). Each position carries specific duties and responsibilities based on the delegation of authority and the needs of the community. This distribution illustrates the presence of religious diversity within the upper levels of the provincial bureaucracy and provides an important picture of Muslim participation

in regional governance. The distribution of these positions within the Southwest Papua provincial government is presented in Figure 2.

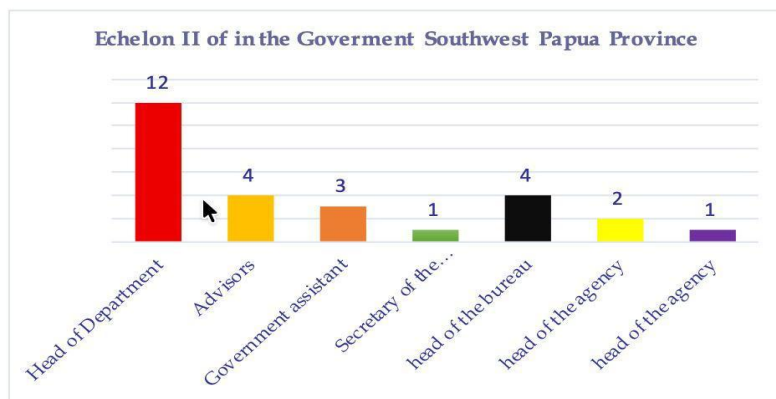


Figure 2. Processed from Various Sources, 2025

In representation in the provincial legislature, as many as 8 members of the Southwest Papua DPRD are Muslims and as many as 27 non-Muslims (Christians and Catholics) out of 35 people. Members of the Southwest Papua House of Representatives who come from among Muslims are distributed into the Democratic Party (2), the National Awakening Party (1), the Indonesian Solidarity Party (1), the Gerindra Party (2), the Golongan Karya Party (1), and the National Mandate Party (1). They were elected from 6 different constituencies with diverse votes.

The distribution of positions in the scope of government and membership in regional legislative institutions shows that the role of Muslims in terms of quantity is still limited. In summary, the above description provides an explanation that, first, the number of Muslims occupying echelon II level positions in the provincial government is limited. This can also be seen in the number of DPRD members with a comparison of 25.71% from Muslims, 14.28% Catholics, and 60% from Christians. Second, each religious group has a strategic role and is based on their respective main duties and responsibilities. Third, the involvement of the two religious groups, although not representative of religious groups, but when linked to the composition of the population based on religion, shows a less balanced portrait. The existence of Muslims in the regional bureaucracy and the DPRD plays a role in the process of formulating Special Regional Regulations (*Perdasus*) and concrete regional development policies.

The existence of Muslims in government institutions has shown a role in many things, especially regarding the improvement of human resources in general without

discriminating against religious backgrounds. IB, an official in the Southwest Papua government circle, said:

"Muslim officials play a very important role in the development of Islamic education, social development and da'wah of the people, as well as the realization of religious tolerance. They no longer look at a particular religion but rather look at the suffering of religious people at large". (Interview with "IM", 2025)

The same thing was also expressed by RM, an official within the Education Office, that:

"Muslim colleagues here have contributed to regional development such as improving the quality of human resources through scholarship and education programs, building harmony and unity through public discussions and social activities, developing harmony-based education and da'wah". (Interview with "RM", 2025)

Regarding the existence of Muslims in the bureaucracy, non-Muslims see it as a natural thing, considering that the appointment of an official is not only based on the issue of belief, but rather on the rights of citizens. However, there is also a view that Muslims should not be given space considering that in non-Muslim minority areas, intimidation often occurs. One of the non-Muslim officials gave a statement on the matter. RF, revealing:

"It doesn't matter if Muslim officials are in the bureaucracy because everyone has the same rights. In this country, we uphold the values of togetherness. The important thing is who the officials are, harmony must be maintained because there are many religions here and it has the potential to cause tension". (Interview with "RF", 2025)

The same thing was expressed by FX, an official in the local government, that:

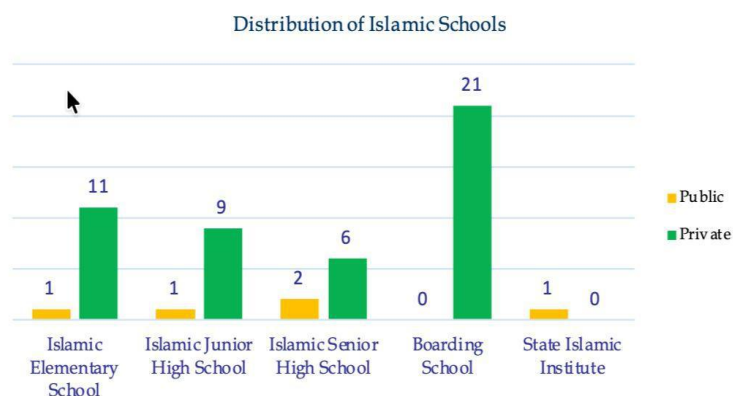
"It doesn't matter if indeed at the level of echelon II officials and others are held by Muslims. The most important thing in my opinion is that tolerance remains. Everyone must prioritize appreciation for each other. Service to any group should not be different". (Interview with "FX", 2025)

This contrasts with YF's view that Muslims should not be given space to avoid unwanted things. He also mentioned cases where young Muslims are a minority and there are often discriminatory practices. He briefly said, "If possible, don't be given space considering that in Christian minority areas they are very intimidated". This information was obtained through conversations over telephone lines. However, in general, non-Muslims state that the position given to anyone, including Muslims, is not a problem if they all play a role in supporting regional development towards a better direction.

The findings indicate that Muslims occupy several strategic positions within the Southwest Papua provincial bureaucracy, including echelon II posts such as heads of agencies and bureau chiefs. Interviews with government officials, community leaders, and religious figures revealed generally positive perceptions of Muslim participation in public institutions. Informants frequently highlighted their contributions to education, scholarship programs, social services, and the promotion of interreligious harmony. Several non-Muslim respondents emphasized that bureaucratic appointments should be based on professional competence and equal citizenship rights rather than religious affiliation. However, a minority of informants expressed concerns about the growing visibility of Muslim actors in public institutions and associated this trend with perceptions of Islamization.

c. The Contribution of Muslims in the Era of Special Autonomy

Muslims have a dominant role in educational, social, and economic fields. According to data released by the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia in 2025, the number of Islamic educational institutions (schools) in Sorong Regency is spread across various locations ranging from the Islamic Elementary School/ *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, Islamic Junior High School/ *Madrasah Tsanawiyah*, and Islamic Senior High School/ *Madrasah Aliyah* levels, as well as Islamic boarding schools. A total of 52 schools are labeled as Islam which is divided into 12 *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, 10 *Madrasah Tsanawiyah*, 8 *Madrasah Aliyah*, and 21 Islamic Boarding School, as well as 1 Higher Education. These schools have public and private status although they are dominated by private schools managed under (non-state) foundations. The complete distribution of Islamic schools in Sorong Regency can be seen in the following diagram.



Source: Processed from data from the Ministry of Religion of Sorong Regency 2025

The diagram above provides information that Islamic schools in this area are relatively complete, ranging from the *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* or Islamic elementary school level to college. Most educational institutions in this area have private status, so management experiences many obstacles, especially financial and teaching staff. The ownership of private schools is owned by foundations and individuals. The public schools did not experience serious obstacles. Both public and private Islamic schools face the condition of students who choose to help their parents work and leave school. The existence of these Islamic educational institutions is in line with the vision of special autonomy, namely improving the quality of human resources by providing education for school-age children. Many graduates produced by Islamic schools have continued their education to a higher level, especially to higher education, both in the Southwest Papua area and in other places in Indonesia.

In addition to the existence of Islamic educational institutions, the presence of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as mass organizations brought a significant influence on social life in this area more broadly. Some Islamic schools are affiliated with these Islamic organizations. These roles lead to more harmonious and open regional development. AK, a Muslim figure stated:

"The activities of NU and Muhammadiyah contribute directly to the realization of a harmonious Southwest Papua. For example, NU makes interfaith dialogue and moderates da'wah. As for Muhammadiyah, it is active in the field of inclusive and progressive education, social services by establishing orphanages and institutions such as Lazismu. Everything is dedicated to the masses, not just Muslims". (Interview with "AK", 2025)

RS, a Muslim figure, openly said the involvement of other umat to build harmony in West Papua Data. RS said:

"NU and Muhammadiyah have carried out activities involving followers of other religions, such as interreligious dialogue, tolerance activities, and humanitarian cooperation. They work closely with other religious leaders to promote harmony and unity, as well as raise awareness of the importance of peaceful coexistence. Examples of these activities include joint social service activities, joint religious holiday celebrations, and discussions on social and religious issues". (Interview with "RS", 2025)

A non-Muslim figure gave an opinion on the existence and role of Islamic mass organizations, especially Muhammadiyah and NU. For him, the existence of the two Islamic organizations is not a problem as long as it provides benefits. YP, said:

"The existence of educational institutions, both owned by Muhammadiyah and NU, is very good as long as it does not disturb the order of others. Everything must bring benefits to the public". (Interview with "YP", 2025)

In addition, various socio-religious activities were also initiated by Muhammadiyah and NU. In fact, there is 1 Muhammadiyah Aisyyiah Higher Education (PTMA), namely the University of Muhammadiyah Education (UNIMUDA) Sorong, which contributes a lot to community education. Most students are non-Muslims. They are spread into several faculties. Likewise, NU has several schools that are managed independently. These schools are places where children receive education from elementary to high school levels. These two organizations routinely conduct studies, mentoring, donations, and community empowerment and play an active role in inter-religious dialogue.

A different thing was expressed by a non-Muslim figure responding to the existence of Islamic educational institutions and Islamic organizations in this area. He said that the existence of both educational institutions and organizations is an Islamization strategy. RM, said that:

"This is one of the ways and very rapid development of Islamization in the land of Papua by means of education, so in my opinion Christian education should be given more space for Christian education". (Interview with "RM", 2025)

The above description provides an explanation of the contribution of Muslims in Southwest Papua with all its dynamics. From the aspect of quantity, the existence of Islamic educational institutions is spread in various corners. The existence of this Islamic educational institution complements the existence of existing public educational institutions, with a big vision of building the education of the nation's generation to be better. However, there are also views that show objections to the existence and contribution of Islamic educational institutions, including Islamic organizations that until now have made important contributions in various aspects of life, especially in Southwest Papua.

The data show that Muhammadiyah, NU, and Islamic educational institutions constitute important arenas of Muslim participation outside formal political and bureaucratic structures. Informants reported that these organizations are involved in education, social services, humanitarian programs, and interfaith activities. Several Islamic schools and universities were found to serve students from both Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds. Most informants perceived these institutions as contributing to community development and social harmony, although some expressed concerns about the expanding visibility of Islamic organizations and associated it with perceptions of

Islamization. The findings therefore reveal both supportive and critical views of Muslim organizational activities within Southwest Papua society.

2. Discussion

The findings reveal a gap between demographic presence and formal political representation. Although Muslims comprise 37.7% of Southwest Papua's population, their representation in the DPRP and strategic bureaucratic positions remains comparatively limited. This gap indicates that political participation cannot be understood solely through electoral representation. Instead, Muslims in this setting appear to rely on what this study terms *compensatory participation*—the expansion of influence through public services, educational institutions, religious organizations, and interfaith networks. This finding extends perspectives that conceptualize participation as a multidimensional process spanning both institutional and non-institutional channels (Edward & Nganyi, 2025; Kopec, 2025; Tomić, 2023), while adding a dimension those studies do not fully specify: how such multidimensionality functions not merely as an alternative pathway but as a deliberate compensatory response to structurally constrained formal access. Rather than indicating exclusion, the case demonstrates how minority groups convert social capital into public legitimacy and policy influence precisely when formal representation is foreclosed.

This pattern carries a broader implication for debates on political representation: descriptive representation does not necessarily produce substantive influence. A comparable pattern has been documented in Europe and the United Kingdom, where Muslim participation increasingly depends on civic organizations, community leadership, and advocacy networks rather than electoral success alone (Hazaymeh, 2025; Jones et al., 2015). Southwest Papua diverges from these cases in a critical respect, however: whereas European Muslim participation typically responds to majoritarian democratic competition, participation in Southwest Papua unfolds within an affirmative governance regime explicitly designed to protect a different identity group. This distinction matters theoretically, because it means representation here operates simultaneously within democratic competition and within a politics of recognition oriented toward historically marginalized Indigenous Papuans—a dual logic largely absent from the European cases. This reading is consistent with, and extends, arguments that institutional arrangements shape the opportunity structures available to minority actors (Bertrand, 2014; Devetak, 2018; Neagu & Klatt, 2025), by specifying that under affirmative asymmetry, those opportunity structures are doubly conditioned—by democratic norms and by identity-protective design.

The bureaucracy itself functions as an arena of identity negotiation. Muslim officials are generally evaluated on professional performance and their contributions to education, social welfare, and regional development; yet recurring concerns about possible “Islamization” reveal that symbolic boundaries persist within local governance even where professional legitimacy is granted. This duality—professional acceptance coexisting with symbolic suspicion—complicates existing accounts of identity politics in democratic institutions, which tend to treat institutional inclusion and identity-based contestation as sequential rather than concurrent (Octavianne et al., 2024; Haas & Lindstam, 2024). The Southwest Papua case suggests instead that the two operate simultaneously: bureaucratic legitimacy in multicultural environments depends not only on formal authority but on the continuous, situational demonstration of neutrality, transparency, and equitable service provision across religious lines.

Beyond formal institutions, Islamic educational networks and organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) constitute a further channel through which Muslim influence is exercised, extending into education, social services, humanitarian activity, and interfaith dialogue. This pattern resonates with research linking Muslim participation to civil society engagement and community-based trust-building (Azabar & Aelst, 2024; Williams, 2017), yet the Papuan case complicates that literature by revealing a dual reception rather than a uniform one: where much of the existing scholarship treats civic religious engagement as generally trust-enhancing, actors in Southwest Papua interpret the same activity through opposing lenses—some as a contribution to social cohesion and human resource development, others as religious encroachment. This divergence indicates that the political value of social capital in plural societies is not fixed but contested, and depends on who is interpreting the expansion of minority institutional presence and against what background anxieties.

These dynamics acquire their fullest significance within Papua's Special Autonomy framework. Law No. 21 of 2001 was designed to advance local participation and historical justice through political affirmation, decentralization, and representative institutions, yet prior studies point to persistent challenges, including limited administrative capacity, friction between state and customary institutions, and competing interpretations of Papuan identity (Dewi, 2017; Hetharia, 2022; Rakia et al., 2021; Sumule, 2003; Hasse Jubba et al., 2024). The present findings sharpen this picture by showing that Special Autonomy simultaneously expands participatory opportunity and reinforces identity-based

boundaries that condition recruitment and legitimacy. Muslim participation, in this light, reflects neither full inclusion nor exclusion, but a negotiated form of citizenship exercised within – and constrained by – an affirmative governance regime.

Theoretically, this article's central contribution is the concept of compensatory participation. Where existing scholarship predominantly measures political influence through electoral representation, legislative presence, or bureaucratic inclusion (Ahmed, 2025; Kumar, 2022; Lajevardi et al., 2024; Indra et al., 2026), the Southwest Papua case demonstrates that minorities can sustain political relevance despite formal underrepresentation by mobilizing educational, religious, and civic resources that generate public legitimacy and trust. This reframing is particularly consequential for understanding participation in settings marked by asymmetrical autonomy, ethnoreligious diversity, and affirmative institutional design, where conventional representational metrics risk mischaracterizing adaptive minority agency as political absence (Hidayati et al., 2025).

Beyond the Indonesian context, this case speaks to a challenge confronting multicultural societies more broadly: reconciling the recognition of majority or indigenous identities with the meaningful inclusion of minority communities (Bertrand, 2014; Devetak, 2018; Neagu & Klatt, 2025). The Southwest Papua case indicates that inclusive governance should be assessed not only by the allocation of political positions but by the presence of genuine opportunities for participation, intergroup collaboration, and equitable access to public resources. Strengthening cross-community dialogue, bureaucratic professionalism, educational cooperation, and transparent governance may therefore matter as much as electoral representation itself – offering a broader lesson for regions confronting identity-based tension: minority participation can reinforce social cohesion without displacing existing institutional arrangements.

This lesson resonates with experiences of Muslim minorities elsewhere, where political relevance has similarly been sustained through community leadership, civic organization, and advocacy networks rather than through electoral representation alone (Hazaymeh, 2025; Jones et al., 2015). What distinguishes the Southwest Papua case, however, is the extent to which such non-electoral influence is channeled through institutionalized civil society actors – religious organizations, educational networks, and interfaith initiatives – that generate public trust through sustained service provision rather than episodic mobilization (Azabar & Aelst, 2024; Williams, 2017; Masyrofah et al., 2026). This suggests that compensatory participation is not merely a residual strategy adopted in

the absence of formal access, but a durable mode of political engagement in its own right, one capable of shaping governance outcomes in multicultural societies well beyond the specific institutional arrangements of Indonesia's Special Autonomy framework.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The analysis is confined to Southwest Papua, a context shaped by distinct historical and governance arrangements, and therefore does not capture the variation that likely exists across other Papuan provinces or regions governed under different institutional frameworks. The evidentiary base also rests on a limited number of elite interviews complemented by descriptive data on bureaucratic and legislative representation, which constrains the extent to which the findings can be generalized to Muslim communities in Papua more broadly. Furthermore, while the study establishes a conceptual link between social capital and political participation, it does not systematically trace how this relationship translates into measurable policy outcomes. These limitations do not undermine the study's core contribution but rather delineate the boundaries within which its findings should be interpreted, while simultaneously pointing to concrete directions for extending this line of inquiry.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the gap between Muslim demographic presence and formal political representation in Southwest Papua does not translate into political marginalization. Rather, influence is redirected through alternative channels—public bureaucracy, educational institutions, religious organizations, and interfaith networks—where legitimacy is earned through professional service delivery, social trust, and civic engagement rather than electoral office alone. Within the Special Autonomy framework, this dynamic exposes a politics of recognition that simultaneously opens avenues for minority participation and reaffirms boundaries designed to protect Indigenous Papuans (OAPs).

The article's central contribution lies in advancing the concept of compensatory participation: a theoretical lens explaining how minority groups sustain political influence by mobilizing educational, religious, and social capital when formal representation is structurally constrained. This concept extends existing debates on political representation and inclusive governance by showing that substantive participation can emerge outside electoral and bureaucratic channels, particularly within asymmetrical autonomy regimes where affirmative institutions both enable and delimit minority agencies. Practically, the

findings suggest that inclusive governance in plural regions such as Papua should not be measured solely by numerical representation, but by institutional capacity to sustain interfaith collaboration, equitable public services, transparent recruitment, and meaningful civic participation.

Building on the limitations acknowledged in the Discussion, future research would benefit from comparative designs extending beyond Southwest Papua to other Papuan provinces with differing governance arrangements, in order to test the broader applicability of compensatory participation across multicultural contexts. Survey-based approaches combined with network analysis are also needed to move beyond the descriptive and elite-interview evidence used here, allowing a more systematic assessment of how educational and religious organizations convert social influence into concrete policy outcomes.

Ultimately, this study affirms that in plural and asymmetrically governed societies, political inclusion is not solely a matter of seats held but of trust earned, services rendered, and social capital cultivated across communal boundaries.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or non-financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly Application and Quilbot to improve the clarity, readability, and language accuracy of the text. Output generated by the tool were carefully reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of this article. All substantive intellectual contributions, including conceptualization, analysis, interpretation of data, and final decisions regarding content, arguments, and conclusions, were carried out solely by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity, originality, and academic quality of this article.

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