



Rethinking Islamic Secularization: Institutional Differentiation, Democracy, and Human Rights in Mun'im Sirry's Thought

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Abstract:

*This study examines Mun'im Sirry's concept of Islamic secularization and its implications for religion-state relations, democracy, and human rights in Indonesia. The relationship between religion and the state remains a significant issue in contemporary Muslim societies, particularly in Indonesia, where religious values, democratic principles, and human rights continuously interact. Existing debates often position secularization as anti-religious, creating tensions between Islamic commitment and modern democratic values. This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive-analytical method and a critical-hermeneutic approach. Data were collected through an in-depth interview with Mun'im Sirry, documentary analysis of his scholarly works, and relevant academic literature, followed by thematic and interpretive analysis. The findings reveal three main arguments. First, Sirry conceptualizes secularization as institutional differentiation rather than the elimination of religion, allowing religious and political institutions to maintain distinct functions. Second, historical analysis demonstrates that differentiation between religious and political authority existed within Islamic traditions and provides a foundation for understanding democracy as contemporary political *ijtihad*. Third, Sirry's framework connects Islamic concepts of *karamah al-insan*, pluralism, and equal citizenship with human-rights principles. This study contributes theoretically by expanding discussions of Islamic secularization beyond the binary opposition between religion and modernity and offers practical implications for developing inclusive democratic governance in plural societies.*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and the state remains one of the most significant issues in contemporary societies, particularly in countries with strong religious identities such as Indonesia. Constructing a balanced relationship between religious values, democratic principles, and human rights is essential because social stability depends on recognizing diversity, equality, and inclusive citizenship. Indonesia represents a distinctive case because it adopts neither a theocratic state model nor a strict secular framework that excludes religion from public affairs. Instead, Pancasila provides a constitutional foundation that accommodates religious expression while maintaining democratic governance and citizenship equality. However, debates surrounding secularization, religious authority, and political Islam continue to shape public discourse in Indonesia. Recent studies indicate that the relationship between Islam, democracy,

and pluralism remains dynamic, involving ongoing negotiation among religious aspirations, political institutions, and democratic principles (Krismono et al., 2025; Paryanto et al., 2025). Furthermore, discussions on religious moderation demonstrate that Indonesian Islam continues to seek a balance between religious commitment and democratic resilience (Pranowo, 2022; Furqon & Ramadani, 2025). Therefore, examining alternative perspectives on Islamic secularization is important for understanding how religion can contribute constructively to democratic society.

Studying Islamic secularization also relates to the broader challenge of maintaining democratic values within religiously diverse societies. In many Muslim-majority contexts, secularization is frequently interpreted as an attempt to marginalize religion from public life. In contrast, contemporary scholarship suggests that secularization may also refer to processes of institutional differentiation, rationalization, and the reconfiguration of authority between religious and political institutions (Golder & Dhima, 2021; Musthofa et al., 2026). This distinction is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where religious identity remains closely connected with political participation, citizenship debates, and public morality. Studies on Indonesian democracy show that the growing influence of religious identity politics can create tensions around minority protection, freedom of expression, and equal citizenship when religious narratives become tools of political exclusion (Hefner, 2021; Putra et al., 2022). Nevertheless, recent discussions on post-secularism emphasize that religion and democracy need not be opposing forces, as religious values may continue to contribute to public ethics within democratic frameworks (Tan, 2021; Wahyudin et al., 2025). Consequently, a critical examination of Islamic secularization is necessary to develop a more balanced understanding of the relationship between religion, state authority, and democratic governance.

Despite Indonesia's constitutional commitment to religious freedom and democracy, conceptual and practical challenges remain regarding religion's appropriate role in public life. One significant challenge is the persistent confusion between secularization and secularism, where secularization is often perceived as an anti-religious ideology rather than a process of differentiating institutional authority from social domains. This misunderstanding has contributed to resistance toward intellectual discussions concerning religious reform, pluralism, and democratic citizenship. Moreover, the politicization of religious identity has intensified debates regarding the extent to which religious authority should influence state policies and individual rights. Research on contemporary Indonesian Islam indicates that conservative religious movements and identity-based political mobilization continue to challenge democratic consolidation, particularly when religious interpretations become tied to exclusive political claims (Qodir et al., 2022). Similarly, studies on Islamic identity and citizenship demonstrate that democratic participation in Indonesia remains shaped by competing understandings of religious belonging and political inclusion (Paryanto et al., 2025). These conditions show the need for a more comprehensive perspective that examines how Islamic thought can respond constructively to modern democratic realities without abandoning religious principles.

In the Indonesian social context, debates about secularization often emerge in discussions of religious freedom, minority rights, democratic participation, and the relationship between Islamic values and state authority. Concepts such as liberalism, pluralism, and secularism remain highly contested because different groups interpret

their meanings through distinct theological and political frameworks. Some religious groups perceive secularization as a threat to Islamic identity. At the same time, other intellectual traditions understand it as an effort to prevent the excessive sacralization of political institutions and worldly affairs. This tension reflects a broader negotiation between exclusivist and inclusive approaches within contemporary Islamic thought. Recent studies on the relationship between Islam, democracy, and secularism in Indonesia demonstrate that these debates are not simply about accepting or rejecting secular ideas but concern how religious traditions negotiate modern political realities (Muwaffiqillah, 2023). Furthermore, research on religious moderation highlights that contemporary Indonesian Islam increasingly requires interpretive frameworks that maintain religious authenticity while supporting pluralistic democratic life (Karim et al., 2026). Therefore, studying Islamic secularization requires attention not only to political structures but also to the intellectual foundations that shape Muslim understandings of religion, authority, and society.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between Islam, democracy, secularization, and human rights from various perspectives, including political Islam, religious moderation, citizenship, and constitutional governance. Hefner (2021), for instance, shows that Indonesian democracy has been shaped by ongoing negotiations between Islamic aspirations and the development of an inclusive public sphere, particularly regarding the relationship between religious identity and citizenship. Similarly, studies on Islamic political movements indicate that democratic consolidation in Indonesia requires mechanisms that accommodate religious participation while preventing the dominance of exclusive interpretations of religious authority (Qodir et al., 2022; Pranowo, 2022). Recent research also highlights that the relationship between Islam and democracy in Indonesia is increasingly shaped by post-Islamism and religious moderation, in which Muslim actors reinterpret political engagement through democratic frameworks rather than formal religious state projects (Karim et al., 2026). Furthermore, discussions of Islamic identity and citizenship show that contemporary Indonesian politics remains characterized by negotiations among religious belonging, political participation, and the principle of equal citizenship (Paryanto et al., 2025). However, much of this literature focuses on political movements, institutional dynamics, and social transformation, while giving limited attention to the intellectual and epistemological foundations of Islamic secularization as articulated by Muslim scholars.

Within this gap, Mun'im Sirry's intellectual contribution is particularly significant because his approach offers a distinctive perspective on the relationship between religion, modernity, and political authority. Unlike approaches that interpret secularization primarily through the lens of religious decline or the exclusion of religion from public life, Sirry conceptualizes secularization as a process of differentiation that distinguishes religious authority from worldly and political domains. His intellectual project is also reflected in his broader Qur'anic scholarship, which emphasizes contextual interpretation, intertextual analysis, and critical engagement with Islamic traditions (Sirry, 2022). Recent studies of Sirry's methodological contributions show that his approach encourages reconstructing Qur'anic interpretation through cross-references, *munāsabah*, and contextual analysis rather than isolated textual readings (Azzahra et al., 2026). Similarly, research on Sirry's interpretation of polemical Qur'anic verses indicates that his approach provides possibilities for developing theological perspectives that support interreligious dialogue and coexistence (Firdaus, 2026). Nevertheless, existing

studies have not sufficiently explored how Sirry's understanding of secularization can contribute to broader theoretical discussions concerning democracy, human rights, and religion-state relations.

This study addresses this gap by positioning Mun'im Sirry's concept of Islamic secularization as an analytical framework for examining the relationship between religion, state authority, democracy, and human rights in Indonesia. Unlike previous studies that primarily analyze secularization from political, sociological, or institutional perspectives, this research focuses on the epistemological dimension of secularization as a process of separating religious authority from political and worldly affairs without diminishing religion's social significance. This approach matters because contemporary debates often reduce secularization to a binary opposition between religious commitment and modern democratic values. Recent studies on secularization in Indonesia suggest that modernization processes, including education and social transformation, may influence religious orientations without necessarily resulting in religious disappearance (Eshtiyagh, 2022). Moreover, contemporary discussions of religious moderation emphasize the importance of contextualizing religious knowledge to keep Islamic teachings relevant amid changing social realities (Saeful Bahri, 2026). Therefore, examining Sirry's thought offers a distinctive contribution by showing how Islamic intellectual traditions can engage democratic principles through reinterpretation, differentiation, and contextualization.

Based on the identified research gap, this study addresses the following research problem: how does Mun'im Sirry conceptualize Islamic secularization, and to what extent can his ideas contribute to strengthening democracy and human rights within the Indonesian context? This research argues that Sirry's understanding of secularization should not be interpreted as a rejection of religion but as an intellectual framework that encourages institutional differentiation, rational interpretation, and the prevention of religious instrumentalization within political structures. Through examining Sirry's perspectives on secularization, Islamic history, democracy, and human dignity, this study seeks to contribute to broader discussions on how Muslim intellectual traditions respond to modern political challenges. This research matters because it moves beyond the conventional dichotomy between secularism and religious governance by proposing a more nuanced understanding of religion-state relations. Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding discussions on Islamic secularization by integrating institutional differentiation, democratic citizenship, and human-rights discourse into a unified analytical perspective. Practically, it provides insights for developing inclusive approaches to religion, democracy, and citizenship in plural societies such as Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive-analytical method combined with a critical-hermeneutic approach. This design was selected because the research aims to explore, interpret, and critically examine Mun'im Sirry's intellectual construction of Islamic secularization and its implications for religion state relations, democracy, and human rights in Indonesia. Qualitative research is appropriate for investigating complex social, religious, and philosophical phenomena because it enables researchers to understand meanings, interpretations, and contextual relationships within a particular intellectual tradition (Bhangu et al., 2023). The critical-hermeneutic approach was applied to analyze the relationships among texts, historical

contexts, and the philosophical arguments underlying Sirry's ideas. Meanwhile, the descriptive-analytical method was used to identify and interpret the conceptual foundations, assumptions, and implications of secularization within Islamic thought. Therefore, this methodological framework enables the study to examine secularization not merely as an ideological concept but as an intellectual and institutional process.

This study is situated within the Indonesian intellectual and socio-political context, where debates regarding Islam, secularization, democracy, pluralism, and human rights continue to develop. Indonesia was selected as the analytical context because it represents a Muslim-majority democratic country that negotiates between religious values and constitutional democracy. Rather than focusing on a geographical research site, this study examines an intellectual context by analyzing Mun'im Sirry's ideas and scholarly contributions. The primary data consisted of Mun'im Sirry's works related to Islamic secularization, Qur'anic interpretation, pluralism, and religion-state relations, complemented by an in-depth interview with Mun'im Sirry. Secondary data were obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and previous studies related to secularization theory, Islamic reformism, democracy, and human rights. The selection of these sources followed purposive sampling principles, in which data are selected based on their relevance to the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

The researcher collected data through in-depth interviews and documentary analysis. The researcher conducted an in-depth interview with Mun'im Sirry to explore his perspectives on secularization, Islamic reform, pluralism, and the relationship between religion and state. The researcher used a semi-structured interview technique because it allows participants to elaborate on their interpretations while remaining consistent with the research objectives (Kallio et al., 2021). In addition, the study conducted a documentary analysis by examining Sirry's scholarly publications and other relevant academic literature on Islamic thought, secularization, democracy, and human rights. Documentary analysis is particularly suitable for intellectual studies because written sources provide important evidence for examining the development, transformation, and contextual meaning of theoretical arguments within a specific discourse (Bowen, 2020).

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis combined with critical-hermeneutic interpretation. The analysis involved four stages: data selection, categorization, interpretation, and contextualization. The analysis first selected relevant information from interviews and documents according to the research focus, then categorized it into major themes, including Islamic secularization, institutional differentiation, religious authority, democracy, pluralism, and human rights. The study then conducted interpretative analysis by examining the meanings and assumptions underlying Sirry's arguments and comparing them with broader secularization theories, particularly José Casanova's concept of institutional differentiation, as well as contemporary discussions on religion and democracy. Finally, the study contextualized Sirry's ideas within Indonesia's socio-political conditions, particularly regarding religious freedom, citizenship, and democratic governance. Thematic analysis was employed because it provides a systematic procedure for identifying patterns of meaning while maintaining interpretative depth in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

To ensure research credibility, this study applied source triangulation and theoretical triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing interview findings with Mun'im Sirry's published works and relevant academic literature. In contrast, theoretical triangulation examined Sirry's ideas through the lenses of secularization theory, democracy, and human rights. Triangulation strengthens qualitative research rigor by allowing researchers to examine phenomena through multiple sources, approaches, or theoretical perspectives, thereby reducing potential interpretative bias and improving analytical consistency (Kawar et al., 2024). Through these procedures, this study seeks to provide a credible and theoretically grounded interpretation of Mun'im Sirry's concept of Islamic secularization and its relevance to contemporary debates on religion, state, democracy, and human rights in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Secularization as Institutional Differentiation Rather Than Anti-Religion

Mun'im Sirry conceptualizes secularization as a process of institutional differentiation rather than the elimination of religion from public life. This view emerges from Sirry's distinction between secularization and secularism. According to Sirry, the main problem in contemporary debates is the tendency to equate the two concepts, which leads to the assumption that any discussion of secularization rejects religious authority. However, he argues that secularization should be understood as a process of reorganizing relationships among institutions, particularly between religious and political institutions. In this framework, secularization does not seek to reduce the importance of religion but aims to establish clearer boundaries of authority. Religion continues to maintain its moral and social functions, while the state operates through political mechanisms with its own institutional legitimacy.

Empirical evidence from the in-depth interview with Mun'im Sirry provides a critical foundation for understanding this finding. In the interview, Sirry emphasized that distinguishing between secularization and secularism is conceptually essential, as the two terms represent different analytical dimensions and carry distinct implications in discussions of religion, politics, and institutional authority. He stated:

"Cak Nur, I think, was one of those who attempted to distinguish between secularism and secularization. These two terms, secularization and secularism, may have different meanings for different people, depending on the approach used. In my view, although these concepts differ in definition, they ultimately converge on certain points. Secularism, essentially, relates to the separation of power, particularly between religious and political authority. Secularization, meanwhile, is the process toward such separation. Some say that secularization is differentiation. However, the essence remains related to the effort to separate religious power from political power." (M. Sirry, personal communication, July 6, 2026).

This statement indicates that Sirry's understanding of secularization is not based on ideological opposition to religion but on regulating institutional authority. The central issue is not whether religion should remain present within society, but rather how religious and political powers can operate without one institution dominating the other. Thus, secularization functions as an institutional mechanism that prevents the fusion of religious legitimacy and political authority while simultaneously allowing religion to remain an important social force.

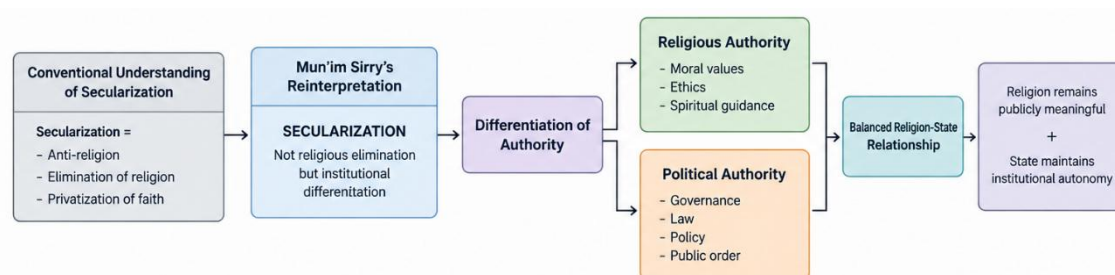


Figure 1. Analytical Framework of Mun'im Sirry's Concept of Secularization

Figure 1 illustrates Mun'im Sirry's conceptual transformation of secularization, shifting the understanding of secularization from a process of religious decline to a mechanism of institutional differentiation. The figure shows that, unlike the conventional interpretation that links secularization to eliminating religion from public life, Sirry conceptualizes secularization as regulating boundaries between religious and political authority. Through this differentiation, religious institutions retain their moral, ethical, and spiritual functions, while state institutions maintain autonomy in governance, law, and public administration. Therefore, the relationship between religion and the state is shaped not by opposition or exclusion but by functional distinction and mutual coexistence. This framework indicates that secularization does not necessarily weaken religion; instead, it prevents the instrumentalization of religious authority for political domination while allowing religion to remain a meaningful social force within a democratic society.

Interpreting secularization as differentiation places Sirry's thought within contemporary debates on secularization theory, particularly José Casanova's concept of institutional differentiation. Casanova argues that secularization should not be reduced to the decline of religious belief or the privatization of religion because these assumptions cannot adequately explain religious persistence in many non-Western societies. Instead, differentiation refers to the process through which social spheres such as politics, law, science, and economics develop relative autonomy from religious institutions. The findings of this study indicate that Sirry adopts a similar analytical orientation by emphasizing the separation of functions between religion and the state rather than the disappearance of religious influence. In the Indonesian context, this perspective provides an alternative framework for understanding secularization beyond the common assumption that it represents a Western anti-religious ideology.

Furthermore, this finding reveals that Sirry's conceptualization of secularization challenges the dominant binary framework that frequently appears in discussions of Islam and modernity. Within this binary, societies are often positioned between two extremes: a religious state in which political authority is directly controlled by religious institutions, or a secular state that excludes religion from public affairs. Sirry's argument introduces a third possibility: a differentiated relationship in which religion and the state interact while preserving their respective domains of authority. Through this perspective, religion is not removed from the public sphere but is prevented from becoming the exclusive source of political legitimacy. Similarly, the state need not adopt an anti-religious position but must maintain institutional independence in governing social and political affairs.

The findings also show that institutional differentiation, in Sirry's view, serves not only to organize state authority but also to protect religion itself. When religious authority

becomes fully integrated with political power, religion may become vulnerable to political instrumentalization because theological claims can be used to justify particular political interests. Conversely, when political institutions maintain autonomy, religious communities gain greater freedom to develop their ethical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions without political burdens. Therefore, differentiation does not weaken religion; rather, it allows religion to function independently as a moral and social institution. This interpretation is particularly relevant in plural societies such as Indonesia, where religious values remain influential while democratic governance requires equal treatment of citizens from diverse backgrounds.

This finding shows that Mun'im Sirry's concept of secularization reinterprets the relationship between religion and modern political institutions. Secularization, according to Sirry, should not be interpreted as an attempt to privatize or eliminate religion but as a process of establishing appropriate boundaries between different forms of authority. This finding contributes to the broader discussion of secularization by demonstrating that differentiation can occur within a Muslim-majority society without producing religious decline. Instead, it creates a framework in which religion can continue to contribute to public morality while political institutions maintain autonomy and accountability. Therefore, Sirry's thought provides an alternative understanding of secularization: not as a conflict between religion and modernity, but as a process of institutional arrangement that enables religion and democracy to coexist within a pluralistic society.

Historical Roots of Religious Political Differentiation and Democratic Ijtihad in Islamic Tradition

This study reveals that Mun'im Sirry's concept of secularization as institutional differentiation is supported by a historical understanding of Islamic political development. Sirry argues that the relationship between religion and political authority in Islam cannot be reduced to a model of complete integration between the state and religious institutions. Instead, Islamic history demonstrates various forms of negotiation, differentiation, and distribution of authority between political rulers and religious scholars. This finding is significant because it challenges the assumption that the separation or differentiation of authority between religion and politics is exclusively a modern Western phenomenon. Through a historical-critical approach, Sirry shows that Islamic civilization has also experienced institutional differentiation, particularly in the relationship between caliphs, scholars, and administrative institutions. Therefore, differentiation should not automatically be interpreted as a departure from Islamic tradition but as part of the historical complexity of Muslim political experiences.

Mun'im Sirry's argument rests on rejecting simplistic interpretations of Islamic political history. Sirry emphasized that the question of Islam and politics should always be examined historically rather than through a single normative assumption. He explained that Islam does not have one uniform political model that has remained unchanged throughout history. According to Sirry, different periods of Islamic history show different arrangements for the relationship between political and religious authority. He stated that contemporary claims presenting Islam as a system in which religious and political authority must always be unified overlook historical realities in which these authorities often operated through different institutions. This argument becomes an important foundation for understanding why Sirry considers differentiation compatible with Islamic intellectual traditions.

One historical example Sirry emphasizes is the Abbasid period, particularly the relationship between the caliphate and the ulama. Sirry shows that although the Abbasid caliphs held significant political authority, they did not fully control religious interpretation. The ulama maintained a degree of intellectual autonomy, particularly in jurisprudence, theology, and religious interpretation. This differentiation became particularly visible during the *Mihna* (inquisition) initiated by Caliph al-Ma'mun in the ninth century. During this period, the state tried to impose the Mu'tazilite doctrine that the Qur'an was created as an official theological position. However, scholars such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal resisted the state's attempt to determine theological truth. This episode shows that political and religious authority were not identical, because religious scholars could challenge the ruler's position on religious matters.

The significance of the Mihna case within Sirry's framework is not merely historical but theoretical. It shows that an Islamic political order did not necessarily eliminate the autonomy of religious scholarship. Ahmad ibn Hanbal's resistance shows that religious authority could exist independently of political power, even within a society governed by a Muslim ruler. This finding strengthens Sirry's argument that institutional differentiation is not necessarily foreign to Islamic traditions. Therefore, the assumption that Islamic political thought requires absolute unity between religion and state warrants reconsideration, as historical practices reveal more complex patterns of interaction between rulers and religious institutions.

Furthermore, Sirry's historical analysis extends to the role of non-Muslims in Islamic political administration, particularly during the Abbasid period. He highlights that historical practices demonstrate the distinction between political administration and religious authority through the participation of Christians and Jews in important governmental positions. Their involvement as administrators, secretaries, and officials shows that state governance often relied on administrative competence rather than religious identity alone. This historical reality challenges interpretations that portray classical Islamic governance as a system in which religious belonging alone determined political participation. Instead, it shows that Muslim political institutions developed through practical negotiations between religious ideals and administrative necessities. In this sense, the evidence supports Sirry's broader argument that political and religious authority have always involved adaptation and differentiation.

Table 1. Historical Evidence Supporting Religious-Political Differentiation in Islamic Tradition

Historical Context	Political Authority	Religious Authority	Analytical Interpretation
Abbasid Caliphate	Caliph as political ruler and administrator	Ulama as interpreters of religious knowledge	Political and religious authority operated through different institutions
Mihna Period	Al-Ma'mun's attempt to impose state-supported theology	Ahmad ibn Hanbal and scholars resisting state intervention	Religious authority maintained autonomy from political power
Abbasid Administration	Government officials managing state affairs	Religious scholars maintaining theological authority	Governance was not identical with religious authority
Early Caliph Succession	Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman through different mechanisms	Islamic ethical principles (<i>shura</i> , justice)	Islamic tradition accepted political diversity

Table 1 demonstrates that the differentiation between religious and political authority identified by Mun'im Sirry is historically grounded rather than merely derived from modern political theory. The historical cases presented indicate that Islamic governance developed through complex relationships between rulers, scholars, and administrative actors. The Mihna shows that political authority could try to influence religious interpretation, while scholars' resistance demonstrates the persistence of independent religious authority. Similarly, the participation of non-Muslim officials in Abbasid administration shows that political governance was not exclusively determined by religious identity. These historical examples support Sirry's argument that Islamic political traditions contain mechanisms of functional differentiation, where religious and political institutions maintain distinct roles while continuing to interact within the same social order.

Based on these findings, Sirry's interpretation of Islamic history provides the foundation for understanding democracy as a form of contemporary political *ijtihad*. Because Islamic history does not show a single fixed political mechanism, democratic institutions can be understood as one possible human effort to realize Islamic ethical principles, including *shura* (consultation), justice, accountability, and public welfare (*maslahah*). Sirry argues that a political system's legitimacy should be judged not by its historical origin but by its ability to achieve ethical objectives. Therefore, democracy does not necessarily replace Islamic values with Western political concepts; rather, it can serve as a modern institutional framework through which Islamic principles of participation and justice are expressed. This finding shows that Sirry's thought moves the discussion of Islam and democracy beyond compatibility to the more substantive question of how political systems embody ethical values.

Sirry's interpretation of *shura* further demonstrates the connection between Islamic tradition and democracy. The Qur'anic principle of consultation provides a normative foundation for political participation, while historical practices demonstrate that consultation can take different institutional forms. The succession of the first four caliphs illustrates this diversity: Abu Bakr was selected through community consultation and *bay'ah*; Umar was appointed through Abu Bakr's nomination, followed by public acceptance; and Uthman was selected through a consultative council. These examples show that early Islamic political history did not establish a single mandatory mechanism for leadership selection; instead, political arrangements developed with the circumstances of the time. Therefore, democracy can be interpreted as a contemporary expression of *shura* because it institutionalizes participation, representation, and accountability.

The recognition of political diversity in Islamic history also relates to the principle of *ikhtilaf* (difference of opinion). Sirry emphasizes that disagreement has always been an essential feature of Islamic intellectual development. The existence of multiple schools of jurisprudence and theological interpretations demonstrates that Islamic tradition does not require absolute uniformity. Rather, diverse interpretations can contribute to intellectual development and social adaptation. In this regard, democracy provides a political framework for managing differences through peaceful deliberation rather than coercion. Accepting disagreement as part of social reality allows democracy to be understood not as a foreign political structure but as a mechanism consistent with Islamic traditions of consultation and intellectual plurality.



Figure 2. Historical Pathways from Religious-Political Differentiation to Democratic *Ijthad*

Figure 2 traces Mun'im Sirry's argument from Islamic historical experience to contemporary democratic *ijthad*. The model shows that differentiation between religious and political authority is a recurring pattern in Islamic political development, not an external concept introduced by modern secular theory. Historical experiences, including the relationship between caliphs and scholars, the Mihna controversy, and diverse mechanisms of leadership succession, reveal that Islamic tradition has accommodated multiple forms of authority arrangement. These historical patterns provide the basis for understanding democracy as a contemporary form of political *ijthad*, in which principles such as *shura*, justice, accountability, and public welfare are institutionalized through modern political mechanisms. Therefore, the model positions democracy not as a replacement of Islamic values but as an adaptive expression of Islamic ethical principles within changing historical contexts.

This finding demonstrates that Mun'im Sirry's understanding of secularization is historically grounded within Islamic intellectual and political traditions. Differentiation between religious and political authority is not simply a modern concept imported from Western political theory; it also appears in Islamic historical experience. This historical understanding also supports Sirry's argument that democracy can be accepted as a form of political *ijthad* because Islam provides ethical principles rather than a rigid institutional blueprint. The contribution of this finding lies in challenging essentialist perspectives that portray Islam either as inherently opposed to democracy or as requiring a fixed political system. Instead, Sirry's thought presents Islamic political tradition as dynamic, historically adaptive, and capable of engaging with modern democratic institutions.

Human Rights, Pluralism, and Equal Citizenship as Islamic-Compatible Principles

Mun'im Sirry's intellectual framework provides a theological and philosophical foundation for understanding human rights, religious pluralism, and equal citizenship within an Islamic perspective. This finding indicates that Sirry does not view human rights as an external concept accepted only because of its Western historical origin. Instead, he argues that the normative principles underlying human rights are compatible with fundamental Islamic teachings, particularly the concept of human dignity (*karamah al-insan*). Through this framework, Sirry challenges the dichotomous assumption that Islamic commitment and universal human-rights principles represent opposing values. His argument suggests that protecting human dignity, freedom, and equality can be understood as part of the moral objectives embedded in Islamic teachings. Therefore, the relationship between Islam and human rights should not be constructed as a confrontation between religious tradition and modernity, but rather as a process of interpretation and contextualization.

Mun'im Sirry explains that his understanding of human rights begins with recognizing inherent human dignity. Sirry argues that although modern human-rights discourse was formally developed in Western political history, its fundamental values

cannot be considered exclusively Western because they are rooted in the universal condition of being human. He stated: “Indeed, conceptually and in terms of formal regulations, human rights were formulated in the West... but the fact that this concept emerged in the West does not mean that it is Western. Human rights, those are human beings’ rights, and they are inherent in human beings. The principles of human rights are inherent within human beings; although they emerged in the West, the values of human rights are universal.” (M. Sirry, personal communication, July 6, 2026).

This statement is significant because Sirry distinguishes between the historical origin and the normative meaning of human rights. The emergence of human-rights institutions in Western history does not limit their applicability to Western societies. Instead, their legitimacy derives from universal human dignity, which different cultural and religious traditions can interpret.

The concept of *karamah al-insan* becomes the central theological foundation through which Sirry connects Islamic teachings with human-rights discourse. He refers particularly to Qur’an 17:70: “And We have certainly honored the children of Adam.” According to Sirry, the verse establishes that dignity is granted to all human beings regardless of religious identity, ethnicity, or social status. The phrase *Bani Adam* refers to humanity as a whole, not a specific religious community. Therefore, human dignity precedes social, political, and religious classifications. This interpretation provides a theological basis for understanding equality and non-discrimination as essential principles of social organization. Within this framework, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and equal protection under the law are not merely modern political demands but can also be understood as consequences of recognizing the dignity God bestows on human beings.

This finding also demonstrates that Sirry’s interpretation of human rights has direct implications for religious freedom and freedom of expression. If human beings possess inherent dignity, religious belief must emerge through individual conviction rather than coercion. Therefore, Qur’an 2:256 (“There is no compulsion in religion”) becomes relevant as a theological foundation for respecting freedom of conscience. Similarly, recognizing human intellectual capacity requires protecting the ability to think, interpret, and express opinions. This understanding aligns with the Islamic intellectual tradition of *ikhtilaf*, where disagreement and diverse interpretations have historically shaped Islamic scholarship. Thus, Sirry’s approach does not understand diversity as a threat to religious identity but as a natural consequence of human rationality and historical experience. In this sense, human rights become compatible with Islamic principles because both emphasize respect for human dignity and moral responsibility.

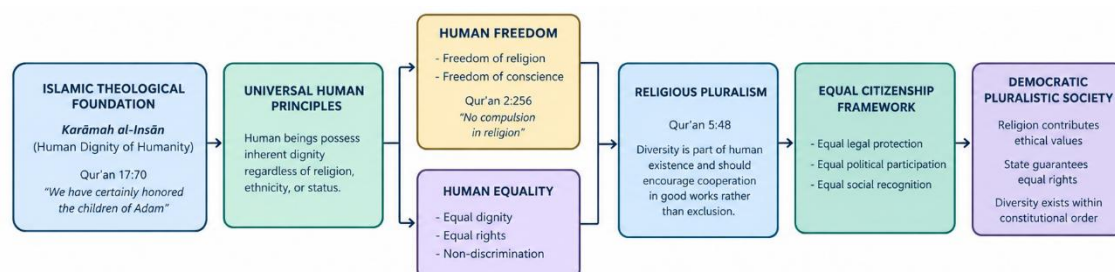


Figure 3. The Theological-Normative Framework of Human Rights and Equal Citizenship in Mun'im Sirry's Thought

Figure 3 illustrates the analytical relationship between *karamah al-insan* (human dignity) and the development of human-rights principles within Mun'im Sirry's thought. The framework shows that Sirry's interpretation begins from a theological premise that human dignity is inherent in all human beings, which then provides a basis for discussing freedom, equality, and religious pluralism. These principles are subsequently connected to the idea of equal citizenship within a democratic society. The figure does not suggest that Sirry equates Islamic concepts with the entirety of modern human-rights discourse; rather, it demonstrates how certain ethical dimensions of Islam can provide a meaningful interpretive framework for engaging with contemporary discussions on rights, diversity, and citizenship. Thus, the model highlights a process of conceptual articulation from religious ethics toward broader social and political implications.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that Sirry extends the concept of human dignity to religious pluralism and citizenship. For Sirry, pluralism cannot be reduced to passive tolerance, where a dominant group merely permits minority groups to exist. Instead, genuine pluralism requires recognition of equal status and equal rights among different communities. His interpretation of Qur'an 5:48 provides an important foundation for this argument: "For each of you We have appointed a law and a way. Had Allah willed, He could have made you one community, but He has willed otherwise to test you through what He has given you. So compete with one another in doing good."

Sirry understands this verse as indicating that diversity is part of the divine arrangement of human existence. Differences among communities should not necessarily lead to conflict or exclusion but should encourage cooperation in pursuing moral goodness. Therefore, pluralism becomes an ethical principle that transforms diversity from a source of division into an opportunity for constructive social engagement.

The significance of this finding becomes clearer within the Indonesian context, where religious diversity represents a fundamental characteristic of society. Sirry's framework suggests that democratic citizenship should not be determined by religious majority or minority status but by equal human dignity. This perspective has important implications for the relationship between religion and the state because a democratic state must guarantee equal rights regardless of religious affiliation. The state's role is not to determine theological truth but to ensure that every citizen receives equal legal protection and opportunities for participation. Therefore, state neutrality does not mean excluding religion from public life; rather, it means preventing state authority from becoming an instrument of religious domination. Through this approach, religion can contribute ethical values to society while the state maintains constitutional responsibility toward all citizens.

The findings also show that Sirry's ideas offer a critical perspective on the relationship between democracy and majority rule. Democracy cannot be understood merely as the dominance of the majority because such an understanding may allow majority groups to restrict the rights of minorities. Instead, democracy requires constitutional protection of human rights and equal citizenship. In this regard, pluralism functions as a necessary foundation for democratic stability because it ensures that differences of religion, belief, and identity do not become grounds for unequal political status. Sirry's thought therefore challenges models of democracy that prioritize numerical majority while neglecting minority protection. A democratic society must create what can be described as an "equal playing field," where all citizens have the same opportunity to participate in social and political life.

Table 2. Analytical Framework of Human Rights, Pluralism, and Equal Citizenship in Mun'im Sirry's Thought

Analytical Dimension	Primary Data / Empirical Evidence	Islamic Foundation	Human Rights Interpretation	Democratic Implication
Human dignity (<i>Karamah al-Insan</i>)	"Human rights are inherent within human beings... although they emerged in the West, the values of human rights are universal." (M. Sirry, personal communication, July 6, 2026)	<i>Wa laqad karramna Bani Ādam</i> (Qur'an 17:70)	Human dignity is inherent and universal, not dependent on religion, ethnicity, or nationality.	Every individual possesses equal moral and legal worth.
Freedom of religion and conscience	Sirry argues that human dignity requires freedom of personal belief and rejects coercion in religious matters.	<i>La ikraha fi al-dīn</i> (Qur'an 2:256)	Freedom of conscience and religious choice	Protection of individual religious rights within society
Freedom of thought and expression	Sirry emphasizes historical-critical interpretation and openness to intellectual diversity.	Human beings possess reason (<i>'aql</i>) and capacity for reflection	Freedom of opinion and intellectual inquiry	Legitimate disagreement becomes part of democratic deliberation
Religious pluralism	"Had Allah willed, He could have made you one community..." (Qur'an 5:48)	Divine recognition of diversity (<i>ikhtilaf</i>)	Recognition and protection of religious diversity	Different communities participate equally in social life
Equal citizenship	Sirry rejects differentiation of citizenship rights based on religious identity.	Justice (<i>'adl</i>) and human dignity (<i>karamah</i>)	Equality before law and non-discrimination	Democratic state protects all citizens equally
Religion–state relationship	Sirry argues that religion should contribute ethically without becoming an instrument of political domination.	Balance between moral values and institutional responsibility	Constitutional democracy and state neutrality	Religion remains socially meaningful while state authority remains accountable.

Table 2 presents the analytical dimensions through which Sirry's ideas on human rights, pluralism, and citizenship are examined. The table demonstrates that the discussion is structured around several interconnected themes: human dignity, freedom, diversity, equality, and the relationship between religion and the state. Each dimension connects empirical evidence from Sirry's statements and interpretations with relevant Islamic concepts and their broader social implications. This framework indicates that Sirry's approach does not reject universal human-rights principles nor adopt them without contextual consideration; instead, it explores points of compatibility between Islamic ethical concepts and contemporary democratic values. The table therefore serves as an analytical synthesis, showing how themes emerging from the data help explain the relationship between Islamic thought, human dignity, and inclusive citizenship.

This perspective also contributes to debates on Pancasila and Indonesia's model of religion-state relations. Sirry's framework suggests that Indonesia represents neither a theocratic state nor a strictly secular state that removes religion from public affairs. Instead, Pancasila creates a constitutional space where religion remains socially

meaningful while citizenship rights are protected universally. Religion can influence moral discourse and social values, but state institutions must operate according to principles of equality, justice, and constitutional governance. This model reflects Sirry's broader argument that religion in public life does not require religious domination over the state. Conversely, state neutrality does not require religion to disappear from society. Rather, both religion and the state can contribute to social life within their respective institutional roles.

Overall, the third finding demonstrates that Mun'im Sirry's thought provides a framework for reconciling Islamic values with human rights, pluralism, and democratic citizenship. His contribution lies in demonstrating that universal human dignity can serve as a common foundation connecting Islamic ethics and contemporary human-rights principles. Through the concept of *karamah al-insan*, Sirry establishes a theological basis for freedom, equality, and non-discrimination. Through his understanding of pluralism, he moves beyond tolerance toward equal citizenship. Through his interpretation of the state-religion relationship, he proposes a model in which religion remains socially significant while political institutions maintain neutrality and accountability. Therefore, this finding confirms that Sirry's intellectual project aims not to reduce Islam's role in society but to develop an interpretation of Islam that engages constructively with democratic values and universal human dignity.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to contemporary debates on secularization, religion-state relations, democracy, and human rights by demonstrating that Mun'im Sirry's intellectual framework does not position modernization as a process that necessarily weakens religious authority. Instead, his interpretation emphasizes institutional differentiation, in which religion and the state maintain distinct functions while continuing to interact within society. This perspective corresponds with contemporary discussions of secularization theory, which argue that secularization should not be understood solely as religious decline or the disappearance of religion from public life (Golder & Dhima, 2021). Similar to post-secular approaches, Sirry's framework challenges the assumption that modernization requires the privatization of religion. However, this study extends existing discussions by demonstrating how institutional differentiation can be articulated within an Islamic intellectual framework, particularly in the Indonesian context where religion remains an important social and moral force. Theoretically, this contribution expands secularization debates by presenting differentiation as a possible mechanism for balancing religious participation and democratic institutional autonomy.

Interpreting secularization as differentiation also offers a different perspective from approaches that treat religion and modern political institutions as inherently antagonistic. Previous studies on secularism and democracy often highlight tensions between religious authority and constitutional governance. In contrast, Sirry's framework suggests that the central issue is not religion's presence in public life but the regulation of institutional boundaries. This argument aligns with Tan (2021), who explains that post-secular perspectives recognize religion's continued relevance in democratic societies while rejecting the assumption that religion must either dominate politics or be excluded from it. Furthermore, studies on Muslim political participation indicate that Islamic actors frequently negotiate their roles within democratic structures rather than simply rejecting

modern political institutions (Yilmaz & Sokolova-Shipoli, 2024). This research contributes by showing that differentiation does not necessarily reflect a Western secular model imposed on Muslim societies but may also emerge through historical and intellectual reinterpretations within Islamic traditions.

The historical dimension of Sirry's argument further contributes to discussions concerning Islam, political authority, and democratic development. The findings indicate that Sirry challenges essentialist interpretations that portray Islamic political tradition as requiring a permanent fusion between religious and political authority. Instead, he highlights historical examples of complex relationships among rulers, scholars, and social institutions. This perspective is compatible with scholarship on Muslim legal and political pluralism, which highlights the diversity of institutional arrangements developed within Muslim societies across different historical contexts (Yilmaz & Sokolova-Shipoli, 2024). This argument matters because it reframes democracy not as an external political model opposed to Islam, but as one possible institutional expression of ethical principles such as consultation (*shura*), justice, accountability, and public welfare (*maslahah*). Nevertheless, this study does not argue that Islamic history naturally produced modern democracy; rather, it demonstrates that Islamic traditions contain interpretive resources that allow engagement with contemporary democratic institutions.

The findings on human rights and pluralism also align with recent debates about the compatibility of Islamic values and universal human-rights principles. Sirry's emphasis on *karamah al-insan* (human dignity) provides a conceptual foundation for understanding freedom, equality, and non-discrimination within an Islamic ethical framework. This perspective aligns with studies arguing that Islamic traditions offer resources for engaging with human-rights discourse through concepts of dignity, justice, and human welfare (Abshar et al., 2021; Asghari, 2023; Bhat & Haq, 2023). However, this study does not claim that Islamic concepts and modern human rights are identical; rather, it shows how theological concepts can provide interpretive foundations for supporting human dignity and equal citizenship. Research on freedom of religion in Islamic perspectives similarly indicates that principles of dignity and moral responsibility can support discussions of religious freedom and protection of individual rights (Faizin et al., 2021; Maulana et al., 2024). Therefore, Sirry's framework provides a constructive approach that moves beyond the binary assumption that Islam and human rights are necessarily incompatible.

The broader implication of this research concerns the relationship between religion, democracy, and citizenship in plural societies, particularly Indonesia. Sirry's perspective suggests that religious involvement in public life does not necessarily undermine democratic principles as long as political institutions maintain equality, constitutional protection, and non-discrimination. This argument aligns with studies emphasizing that Indonesian pluralism requires not only recognition of diversity but also institutional mechanisms that guarantee equal citizenship (Abustan, 2023; Apandie et al., 2022). At the same time, research on religious identity and political orientation demonstrates that diversity may create democratic tensions when religious identification becomes a basis for political exclusion (Putra et al., 2022). Therefore, this study's practical implication is the need to develop a model of religion-state relations that allows religious communities to contribute ethically to public discourse while preventing political authority from privileging or marginalizing particular groups. This research is novel in integrating secularization, Islamic historical analysis, human dignity, and citizenship into a single analytical framework. Rather than presenting Islam and democracy as opposing

forces, this study demonstrates the possibility of a contextual relationship in which religion, human rights, and democratic governance can interact within a framework of institutional differentiation and equal citizenship.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Mun'im Sirry's concept of Islamic secularization provides an alternative framework for understanding the relationship between religion, state, democracy, and human rights by redefining secularization as institutional differentiation rather than the elimination of religion. In line with the research objectives, the study shows that Sirry's thought offers a contextual interpretation of secularization, explains the historical possibility of differentiated religious and political authority within Islamic traditions, and highlights the compatibility of Islamic ethical principles, human dignity, pluralism, and democratic citizenship. The main scholarly contribution of this research lies in integrating secularization theory, Islamic historical analysis, and human-rights discourse into a single analytical framework, thereby expanding discussions that often portray Islam and modern democratic values as inherently contradictory. The study shows that Sirry's intellectual framework does not seek to reduce religion's role in society but to develop an interpretation of Islam that can engage constructively with democracy and universal human dignity. Nevertheless, this research is limited by its focus on one Muslim intellectual figure and relies primarily on qualitative interpretation of Sirry's works and interview data. Future studies may expand the analysis by comparing Sirry's ideas with other Muslim intellectuals, examining broader social responses to Islamic secularization, or conducting empirical research on how these concepts operate within contemporary Muslim societies and democratic institutions.

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