

Trumpism and The Global Challenge to Decolonization: Reflections from Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This article explores the global implications of Trumpism as a political and ideological phenomenon and its impact on the ongoing challenges of decolonization, specifically focusing on Southeast Asia. Drawing on qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including political speeches, policy documents, media narratives, and scholarly literature, this study situates Trumpism within a broader resurgence of right-wing populism and neo-imperial rhetoric. While Trumpism is rooted in the American context, its discursive and ideological reach has resonated globally, often reinforcing colonial legacies and obstructing decolonial aspirations in formerly colonized regions. In Southeast Asia, these influences manifest in renewed nationalist movements, anti-globalist rhetoric, and a retreat from critical postcolonial engagement. By examining how Trumpist narratives circulate and take root in Southeast Asian political discourse, this article highlights the complex entanglements between global populism and regional struggles for epistemic and political sovereignty. The study contributes to decolonial scholarship by emphasizing the need for sustained critical reflection on how external political ideologies affect local trajectories of postcolonial development. This study underscores how global populist ideologies can obstruct efforts toward epistemic sovereignty and national self-determination in postcolonial societies.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the global political landscape has witnessed a pronounced shift toward right-wing populism, nationalism, and illiberalism, epitomized most visibly by the political phenomenon known as Trumpism. Emerging from the United States but rapidly acquiring transnational resonance, Trumpism is more than a political style or electoral strategy; it is a constellation of discourses that challenge liberal democratic norms, valorize nativism, and frequently invoke nostalgia for imperial or hegemonic pasts (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2019). While often analyzed within the boundaries of American politics, Trumpism's ideological reach extends far beyond the U.S., influencing political imaginaries, discourses, and leadership styles globally.

In this broader geopolitical context, the rise of Trumpism presents a unique challenge to the project of decolonization, particularly in postcolonial regions such as Southeast Asia. Decolonization, both as a historical process and a contemporary intellectual and political project, seeks to dismantle the enduring structures of colonial power, epistemology, and cultural domination (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011). Although formal decolonization in Southeast Asia began in the mid-20th century with the withdrawal of European and American

colonial powers, the region continues to grapple with the complex legacies of imperialism manifested in state-building practices, elite power structures, educational systems, and national narratives (Reid, 2015).

Contemporary decolonization efforts, both grassroots and academic, aim to question these inherited colonial foundations and assert alternative frameworks rooted in indigenous knowledge, regional autonomy, and epistemic sovereignty (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Alatas, 2006). However, the global resurgence of right-wing populism, typified by Trumpism, threatens to derail these fragile efforts. Trumpism promotes a simplified, often revisionist reading of history, glorifies Western dominance, and delegitimizes critical race and postcolonial discourses under the guise of political correctness or "woke ideology" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

These discourses are not confined to the United States. Through a combination of media circulation, foreign policy influence, and symbolic power, Trumpist rhetoric has found traction in various political environments, including Southeast Asia (Bland, 2020; Asia Society, 2025). In this region, where political leaders often draw upon both nationalist and religious narratives to consolidate authority, the Trumpist template of strongman politics, populist appeals, and anti-globalist sentiment finds receptive ground (Chachavalpongpun, 2020). This convergence raises urgent questions about how imported ideological currents may serve to reinforce existing colonial legacies rather than dismantle them.

This article interrogates the influence of Trumpism on the decolonial discourse in Southeast Asia through a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including political speeches, policy documents, media commentary, and scholarly literature. It asks: How does Trumpism, as a global political discourse, interact with and potentially undermine decolonization efforts in Southeast Asia? And further, what does this tell us about the vulnerabilities and limitations of current postcolonial trajectories in the region? By situating Trumpism as both a symptom and agent of a broader ideological regression in global politics, this study provides a historically informed and politically grounded examination of how postcolonial spaces continue to be shaped by external hegemonic influences long after formal colonization has ended.

This research is both timely and significant. As Southeast Asian nations negotiate their positions in an increasingly multipolar and ideologically fragmented world order, the ability to critically reflect on the influence of global populist ideologies becomes vital to sustaining decolonial momentum. This study contributes to both postcolonial and political science scholarship by foregrounding how seemingly localized political phenomena, like Trumpism, can reverberate through transnational discourse networks, influencing policy, identity, and historical interpretation in regions far removed from their origin (Acharya, 2020; The Jakarta Post, 2019). Ultimately, the article argues for renewed scholarly and political attention to how contemporary global ideologies continue to intersect with, and potentially destabilize, the long and unfinished work of decolonization.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

To explore how Trumpism poses a challenge to the ongoing project of decolonization in Southeast Asia, this study draws upon two intersecting theoretical domains: postcolonial theory and global populism studies. By engaging in these frameworks, it can be analyzed how global right-wing discourses, such as Trumpism, interact with historically embedded structures of coloniality and postcolonial governance in the Global South.

1.1.1 Conceptualizing Trumpism

The concept of Trumpism emerged during Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential Campaign though its ideological roots can be traced earlier to other similar movements such as the Tea Party in the United States after 2008 and American right-wing nationalism back in the 1990s. It can be seen scholars such as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), Norris and Inglehart (2019), and Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2019) define Trumpism not merely as a political style but as a constellation of discourses characterized by nationalism, anti-globalism, nativism, authoritarian populism and also nostalgia for hegemonic pasts. While the specific term "Trumpism" was not widely used before 2010, however its underlying ideological elements had already been circulating in American conservative politics. By 2016, the term gained traction as a label for the political, cultural and rhetorical strategies associated with Trump which have since reverberated globally.

1.1.2 Postcolonial Theory and Coloniality of Power

Postcolonial theory provides the foundational lens for understanding the long-lasting impact of colonial structures beyond formal political independence. Key to this analysis is the concept of the "coloniality of power" developed by Anibal Quijano (2000), which posits that colonial logics of racial, cultural, and epistemic hierarchy continue to shape institutions, identities, and knowledge systems even after the end of direct colonial rule. Coloniality persists through the imposition of Eurocentric epistemologies, political ideologies, and governance models, which often remain unchallenged in post-independence nation-states.

In the context of Southeast Asia, postcolonial scholars have emphasized the enduring influence of colonial-era legal systems, education models, and state formation processes (Alatas, 2006; Reid, 2015). The ongoing reliance

on Western-centric frameworks for legitimacy, development, and international alignment illustrates how decolonization in the region is an incomplete and contested process. Postcolonial theory, therefore, provides a critical vocabulary for interrogating how Southeast Asian societies negotiate these inherited structures and attempt to assert their own epistemic and political autonomy.

1.1.3 Decolonial Theory and Epistemic Disobedience

Complementing postcolonial critique, decolonial theory, particularly as articulated by Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018), foregrounds the need for “epistemic disobedience”: the rejection of imposed Western knowledge hierarchies and the recovery of subjugated ways of knowing. Decoloniality emphasizes the structural, ontological, and epistemological dimensions of colonial power, pushing beyond mere political independence to interrogate how knowledge production, identity, and agency are still mediated by colonial matrices of power.

Trumpism, with its emphasis on Western civilizational supremacy, anti-intellectualism, and disregard for non-Western historical narratives, can be read as an ideological regression that strengthens the very colonial logic that decoloniality seeks to dismantle. Its global diffusion through media, diplomacy, and soft power acts as a form of cultural recolonization, potentially undermining localized efforts at decolonial knowledge reclamation and political transformation.

1.1.4 Populism and Authoritarian Nationalism

The second pillar of this framework engages with populism theory, especially the contemporary surge of right-wing populism and authoritarian nationalism. Scholars such as Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) describe populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that divides society into two antagonistic groups: the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite.” While this formulation is flexible and context-dependent, right-wing populism typically combines nativism, anti-globalism, and conservative nationalism, often couched in anti-immigrant, anti-minority, or anti-intellectual discourses.

Trumpism, as a unique manifestation of American right-wing populism, exemplifies these characteristics while also exporting a model of political communication, personalist leadership, media antagonism, and historical revisionism that has found resonance in Southeast Asia (Chachavalpongpun, 2020). Populist leaders in the region, such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines (Juego, 2018), or Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia (Kay, 2025), have adopted similar rhetorical and governance strategies that echo Trumpian tropes. In these contexts, populism functions as both a legitimizing narrative and a governing style that can hinder pluralistic, historically nuanced, and decolonial discourses.

1.1.5 Transnational Ideological Flows

Finally, this study also considers the role of transnational ideological flows, in which global political movements, discourses, and symbols circulate beyond their points of origin and become embedded in local political cultures. Scholars of global populism note that ideas and strategies are increasingly mediated by digital platforms, international media, and diplomatic networks (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2019). Trumpism's rhetorical strategies and ideological motifs, such as “Make America Great Again,” the vilification of globalism, and “America First” isolationism, have been adapted and mirrored by Southeast Asian elites, sometimes to resist Western liberalism, but paradoxically also to reinforce neo-colonial alignments and hierarchies. Understanding these flows is essential to grasping how a phenomenon seemingly rooted in American exceptionalism has global implications for decolonial struggles in the postcolonial world.

To visually represent the interplay between these theoretical domains, this study includes a conceptual framework that maps how postcolonial theory, decolonial thought and populism studies intersect to explain the global diffusion of Trumpism. Furthermore, the framework also illustrates how coloniality of power, epistemic disobedience and populist discourse converge in Southeast Asia resulting in a complex ideological landscape where nationalist rhetoric and authoritarian populism can obstruct decolonial aspirations.

2. Literature Review

The increasing global influence of Trumpism and its intersections with postcolonial dynamics in Southeast Asia require an interdisciplinary inquiry spanning political science, history, and postcolonial studies. Existing literature on populism, decolonization, and Southeast Asian political development offers important insights but often treats these phenomena in isolation. This review synthesizes key academic debates relevant to this study, focusing on a few areas related to the study.

Inglehart and Norris (2016) provide a foundational analysis of the rise of right-wing populism in the contemporary political landscape, emphasizing the role of cultural backlash among economically and socially marginalized groups. Their study explains how populist movements leverage fears around immigration, globalization, and national identity to galvanize support, with Trumpism epitomizing this phenomenon through

its nationalist rhetoric and anti-elitist stance. However, while their work effectively captures the cultural and socio-economic underpinnings of populism in Western contexts, it pays limited attention to how these dynamics translate into non-Western or postcolonial settings such as Southeast Asia. This leaves a significant gap regarding how right-wing populism, particularly Trumpism, interacts with postcolonial political realities and decolonization efforts in the region.

Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) examine the consequences of national populism on liberal democracies, arguing that right-wing populist leaders often undermine democratic institutions by promoting authoritarian governance, suppressing dissent, and fostering polarization. Their work is pivotal in linking populist rhetoric to tangible political outcomes, illustrating how Trumpism challenges liberal norms in the United States and beyond. Nevertheless, their analysis primarily focuses on democratic backsliding within established Western democracies, offering limited insight into how populist authoritarianism manifests and is resisted in postcolonial societies where democratic institutions may be weaker or differently constituted. This creates an opportunity to explore how such populist movements affect democratic consolidation and decolonization processes in Southeast Asia.

While these studies largely emphasize Western contexts, more recent study, Lim (2023) highlights the role of social media and algorithmic culture in shaping populist activism in Southeast Asia by demonstrating how digital platforms amplify authoritarian populism across the region.

De Cleen, Glynos, and Mondon (2020) theorize the mechanisms by which populist ideologies travel and adapt across borders, emphasizing the role of discourse and political performance in this process. Their work introduces the concept of "ideological contagion," which explains how political narratives are localized while maintaining their core features. This framework is useful for analyzing how Trumpism's rhetoric and political tactics are emulated in diverse contexts, including Southeast Asia. However, while offering strong theoretical tools, their study lacks detailed empirical engagement with the specific ways Trumpism interacts with postcolonial narratives or challenges decolonial projects, which is essential for understanding its impact in former colonial regions.

Moyn (2021) explores how Trumpism has influenced global political culture by emboldening authoritarian and nationalist leaders worldwide. In *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War*, Moyn argues that the rhetoric of American exceptionalism exemplified by Trump resonates with postcolonial states seeking to assert sovereignty through militarism and exclusionary nationalism. While offering an insightful perspective on ideological diffusion, the book focuses more on global militarism than the decolonial trajectories of former colonies. Thus, the extent to which Trumpism obstructs or reshapes decolonial discourses in regions like Southeast Asia remains an area ripe for deeper exploration.

Collectively, these studies establish the global and regional contours of right-wing populism, authoritarianism, and decolonization. Yet, significant gaps remain in understanding how Trumpism, as a specific variant of right-wing populism, operates transnationally to influence postcolonial political trajectories and impede decolonial efforts in Southeast Asia. This research aims to fill these gaps by bridging political science, postcolonial theory, and Southeast Asian studies through qualitative analysis of secondary sources. Moreover, it is noted that there remains a lack of integrative studies that draw together postcolonial theory, populism studies and Southeast Asian politics in a single analytical frame. While the literature acknowledges the transnational spread of populism, few works systematically assess how these discourses affect epistemic and cultural sovereignty in the postcolonial Global South. Hence, this article contributes to that emerging dialogue by focusing specifically on the ideological entanglements between Trumpism and decolonial trajectories in Southeast Asia.

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative research design, specifically drawing on discourse and content analysis to explore how Trumpism as a contemporary form of right-wing populism influences, obstructs, or reshapes discourses of decolonization in Southeast Asia. The methodology is grounded in an interpretive-constructivist epistemology that views political narratives and ideological expressions not as neutral facts but as socially constructed, historically contingent, and deeply embedded in power relations (Fairclough, 1995; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015).

The study adopts discourse and content analysis as its primary analytical tools. Discourse analysis is appropriate given the study's interest in examining how language and rhetoric are used to convey political ideologies, assert power, and shape collective identities. It enables a critical reading of the symbolic structures that support Trumpist narratives and how such structures are adopted or resisted in Southeast Asian contexts. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), in particular, provides a framework to understand how texts, such as political speeches or media coverage, both reflect and construct sociopolitical realities (van Dijk, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

The corpus of data consists primarily of secondary sources, curated based on their relevance to Trumpism, Southeast Asian politics, and postcolonial narratives. These materials include political speeches and statements by Donald Trump and Southeast Asian leaders (e.g., Duterte, Prabowo, Mahathir), especially those that demonstrate populist, nationalist, or anti-globalist rhetoric. Secondly, media articles and opinion editorials from

both U.S. and Southeast Asian sources (e.g., *AP News*, *Jakarta Post*) that discuss the regional influence of Trump-era politics. Thirdly, U.S. foreign policy documents, particularly those from 2016–2020 (e.g., America First National Security Strategy) and subsequent policy shifts under Trump's administration that had implications for Southeast Asia and lastly academic literature on right-wing populism, Southeast Asian political identity, and postcolonial theory, which helps to contextualize and triangulate the discourse analysis. By drawing from both Western and Southeast Asian sources, the study ensures a multi-perspectival analysis that recognizes the asymmetrical power relations in global knowledge production, a core concern of postcolonial methodology (Spivak, 1988).

The analysis is guided by an interpretive and critical lens, combining postcolonial theory with political discourse analysis (PDA). Postcolonial theory foregrounds the persistence of colonial epistemologies in contemporary political narratives and explores how decolonization is often incomplete or reconfigured by new forms of ideological domination (Said, 1978; Bhambra, 2014). Within this frame, the study interprets Trumpism not simply as a national political phenomenon but as part of a transnational ideological discourse that reproduces colonial hierarchies under the guise of populism and nationalism.

Political discourse analysis complements this by focusing on the strategic use of language in the legitimation of political power, especially how “the people,” “the elite,” and “the other” are constructed within texts (Chilton & Schaffner, 2002). The integration of PDA with postcolonial insights enables the analysis to expose how Trumpist discourse, when diffused globally, may reinforce state-centric nationalism, suppress pluralism, and hinder postcolonial societies' attempts to redefine themselves beyond colonial frames.

Given the interpretive nature of this research, analytical validity is ensured through triangulation, comparing patterns across different source types and reflexive engagement with the positionality of the researcher. Rather than seeking generalizability, the study prioritizes contextual depth, examining specific rhetorical convergences and ideological flows between the U.S. and Southeast Asia. Additionally, a reflexive journal was maintained to track emerging interpretations and ensure transparency in analytical decisions, in line with best practices in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Historical Context: Colonial Legacies in Southeast Asia

The modern political and socio-economic fabric of Southeast Asia is deeply entangled with its colonial past. From the 16th to the mid-20th century, the region was carved into spheres of influence by European imperial powers: the British in Burma and Malaya, the Dutch in Indonesia, the French in Indochina, and the Spanish and later the Americans in the Philippines. Thailand (formerly Siam) was the only state in the region to maintain formal independence, albeit under intense colonial pressure and diplomatic manipulation.

Colonialism in Southeast Asia was not only an exercise in political and economic domination but also an epistemic project that reshaped native understandings of governance, identity, and development. As Thongchai Winichakul (1994) famously illustrated in *Siam Mapped*, even the geographical imagination of nationhood was a colonial construct, imposed through mapping, census, and education systems that privileged Western categories of knowledge.

The imposition of colonial authority disrupted traditional governance systems and generated long-term structural inequalities. The extractive nature of colonial economies prioritized resource exploitation over sustainable development, laying the groundwork for post-independence dependency and uneven modernization (Furnivall, 1948).

Following World War II and the collapse of European colonial empires, Southeast Asia became a critical theatre in the global ideological struggle between capitalism and communism. The United States emerged as a dominant actor in the region, not only as a military force but also as an ideological and economic powerbroker. Through doctrines such as the Truman Doctrine and the Domino Theory, U.S. foreign policy positioned Southeast Asia as a frontline against communist expansion. This logic underpinned interventions such as the Vietnam War, support for anti-communist regimes in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, and covert involvement in Laos and Cambodia (McMahon, 1999).

While these interventions were framed as efforts to preserve “freedom” and “democracy,” they often involved support for authoritarian leaders and suppression of leftist or nationalist movements. This paradox of promoting liberalism abroad while enabling illiberal governance created enduring tensions in Southeast Asia's political development and contributed to the persistence of authoritarian regimes (Kahin, 1987).

The end of formal colonialism did not bring about a clean rupture from colonial structures. Instead, Southeast Asian nations found themselves grappling with deeply embedded colonial legacies in law, governance, and national identity. In Malaysia and Singapore, colonial pluralism and racial categorization have been reproduced in postcolonial state structures, perpetuating ethnic-based policies and political contestation (Shamsul, 1996). Similarly, in Indonesia, the New Order regime (1966–1998) under Suharto harnessed colonial models of centralized bureaucracy and militarized governance to build a developmentalist state, often at the expense of civil

liberties and regional autonomy (Anderson, 1990). The struggle for sovereignty, therefore, has been not only against foreign powers but also against internal structures inherited from colonial rule.

Even after the Cold War, the United States has continued to exert profound ideological influence in Southeast Asia economically, culturally, and politically. Through soft power instruments like educational exchanges, development aid, and media, as well as through security cooperation under mechanisms such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the U.S. continues to shape regional political norms and values (Beeson, 2011).

More recently, the rise of Trumpism has introduced a new layer of ideological influence, one that valorizes nationalism, transactional diplomacy, and anti-globalist sentiments. This shift challenges earlier liberal-democratic ideals promoted by the U.S. and raises concerns about how Southeast Asian states, many of which struggle with unresolved colonial and identity crises, may internalize or emulate such populist discourses. As scholars such as Acharya (2021) have noted, the erosion of multilateralism and moral leadership under Trump has opened space for regional powers to redefine norms in ways that may resist or replicate colonial patterns.

5. Trumpism as A Global Discursive Force

Trumpism is more than the sum of Donald Trump's personal brand or domestic policies; it represents a broader political ideology and discursive style that centers on nativism, authoritarian populism, economic nationalism, and anti-globalism. At its core, Trumpism is characterized by a Manichaeic worldview that divides society into the virtuous "people" and a corrupt "elite," while simultaneously scapegoating external threats such as immigrants, global institutions, or non-Western competitors (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

The slogan "America First" encapsulates the ideology's inward-looking orientation. It signals a break from liberal internationalism and multilateral diplomacy, favouring unilateralism, protectionism, and sovereign exceptionalism (Gause, 2017). Trumpist rhetoric portrays globalism as a threat to national identity, economic self-sufficiency, and cultural purity.

Another essential aspect of Trumpism is its anti-immigration stance, often couched in terms of cultural survival or national security. Through repeated references to border walls, refugee bans, and demographic fears, Trumpism constructs migration not as a humanitarian or economic issue but as an existential crisis. This discursive framing reinforces the idea of an embattled nation under siege, thereby justifying restrictive policies and exceptional measures (Brown, 2017).

Though rooted in U.S. domestic politics, Trumpism has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to resonate globally, particularly in countries already experiencing political polarization, nationalist revivalism, or disillusionment with liberal globalization. Scholars have observed that Trumpism's appeal lies in its rhetorical flexibility and emotional potency, it can be appropriated by leaders of diverse ideological orientations as a strategic discursive resource (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2019).

In Southeast Asia, for instance, leaders such as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia, and even Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia have invoked nationalist-populist tropes that mirror Trumpist language. These include references to sovereignty under threat, a need to "take back the nation," or a vilification of liberal elites and foreign influence (Curato, 2016; Mietzner, 2020).

The global diffusion of Trumpism has been facilitated by an increasingly integrated media ecosystem. Trump's mastery of social media, particularly Twitter, enabled him to bypass traditional diplomatic and journalistic filters, reaching global audiences directly. His rhetorical style, combative, hyperbolic, and emotionally charged, was readily translatable into memes, hashtags, and viral videos, enhancing its reach and appeal (Ott, 2017). Moreover, U.S. cultural soft power, long disseminated through Hollywood, music, and tech platforms, has historically reinforced global admiration or emulation of American norms. While Trumpism departs from traditional liberal-democratic values, its visibility in global media has ironically amplified its legitimacy, especially among authoritarian-leaning regimes that seek justification for populist governance.

The rise of right-wing media ecosystems (e.g., Breitbart, Fox News, InfoWars) and algorithmic polarization on platforms like Facebook and YouTube has further enabled the transnational spread of Trumpist content, blurring the boundaries between domestic and foreign political discourse (Groshek & Engelbert, 2020). These digital dynamics are especially relevant in Southeast Asia, where social media penetration is high, media literacy is uneven, and populist leaders increasingly rely on online platforms for political mobilization (Lim, 2017).

Trumpism operates as a global discursive force with ideological, cultural, and digital components. Its transnational appeal lies in its capacity to articulate grievances through a potent mix of nationalism, identity politics, and populist anti-elitism. In Southeast Asia, these narratives intersect with postcolonial anxieties and governance challenges, making Trumpism not merely an American export but a globally adaptable ideology that can take on locally specific forms.

6. Reflections From Southeast Asia

While Trumpism emerged from a distinct U.S. political context, its populist, nationalist, and illiberal discourses have found echoes in Southeast Asia, where political actors have long grappled with postcolonial identity crises,

elite domination, and geopolitical dependency. This section examines how Southeast Asian leaders have appropriated or aligned with Trumpist rhetoric and how such developments have undermined or reversed decolonial trajectories in the region.

6.1 The Philippines: Duterte's Populism and Penal Nationalism

Rodrigo Duterte's presidency (2016–2022) in the Philippines offers one of the clearest regional reflections of Trumpist-style populism. Duterte's anti-elite, anti-globalist, and strongman rhetoric aligned closely with Trumpism, particularly in his rejection of international human rights norms, liberal democratic values, and U.S.-led multilateralism. While initially elected on a platform of reform and anti-corruption, Duterte quickly adopted penal populism, focusing on "law and order" through brutal drug war policies that prioritized spectacle over legality (Curato, 2017).

Duterte also used nationalist rhetoric to delegitimize critics, often branding them as "un-Filipino" or foreign agents. His alignment with China, rejection of U.S. criticisms, and attacks on the International Criminal Court reflect a turn away from postcolonial accountability toward a sovereign nationalism that mirrors Trump's "America First" ethos, effectively diluting decolonial discourses grounded in human rights and global justice (Thompson, 2020).

6.2 Indonesia: Prabowo, Jokowi, and Populist Nationalism

Indonesia's political arena has also seen the rise of populist nationalism and militarized rhetoric, particularly through figures like Prabowo Subianto, a former general and two-time presidential contender who eventually became Minister of Defence under President Joko Widodo (Jokowi). Prabowo has invoked Trump-like language, framing himself as a nationalist savior against corrupt elites and foreign influences, while emphasizing Indonesia's greatness and historical destiny (Karmini, 2025).

Even Jokowi, a moderate figure by comparison, has increasingly adopted nationalist-populist narratives under pressure from conservative groups and military elites. For example, the passage of the Omnibus Law and the shrinking of civil society space have been justified in the name of national unity and development, rhetorically akin to Trump's appeal to national revival and anti-regulatory politics (Mietzner, 2020). These shifts mark a departure from Indonesia's post-Suharto reformasi era, which had emphasized pluralism, human rights, and democratic consolidation, key tenets of a decolonial political project. Trumpism-style governance has thus aided a re-legitimation of authoritarian nostalgia and political centralization.

6.3 Malaysia: National Pride and the Return of Conservative Elites

Malaysia presents a more complex but equally instructive example. In recent years, especially following the 2018 electoral defeat of UMNO and the subsequent political realignments, Malaysian politics has witnessed the resurgence of conservative Malay-Muslim nationalism, often couched in rhetoric that resembles Trumpist narratives of national pride, victimhood, and elite betrayal.

Figures such as Mahathir Mohamad (during his second premiership) and leaders from the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) have adopted discourse that marginalizes minorities and international NGOs, while positioning Malay-Muslim identity as under threat. Mahathir's attacks on Western liberalism and "foreign interference" reflected a broader turn against international norms resonant with Trump's anti-globalist discourse (Welsh, 2021).

These trends have undermined Malaysia's earlier reformist momentum and multicultural decolonial aspirations, pushing the nation toward majoritarian ethno-nationalism. The postcolonial challenge of building an inclusive, pluralistic national identity has been sidelined by populist appeals to ethno-religious dominance. Nevertheless, such narratives have been met with resistance from segments of Malaysian civil society including youth movements, reformist political movement and academic circles that continue to advocate for a more inclusive, democratic vision of national identity.

6.4 Regional Analysis: Decolonization in Retreat?

Across Southeast Asia, the rise of populist nationalism and Trumpist-aligned discourses has not merely reshaped political language, it has actively complicated and, in many cases, reversed key decolonial aspirations that emerged in the post-independence and reformist periods. Although each national context varies in its political trajectory, there is a discernible regional pattern wherein ruling elites and political actors increasingly mobilize authoritarian nostalgia, ethno-religious supremacy, and anti-globalist sentiment to justify illiberal governance. In the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, populist figures have relied on historical grievances, myths of national greatness, and binary narratives of "us versus them" to reinforce a narrow form of nationalism that eclipses the pluralistic, justice-oriented spirit of decolonization. This approach marginalizes minority voices, delegitimizes civil society, and erases histories that challenge state-sanctioned versions of national identity.

One key mechanism in this process is the revival of militarized governance and executive consolidation, often framed as a response to external threats or internal “moral decay.” This has enabled the rollback of institutional checks and balances, legal accountability, and participatory democracy, all pillars of postcolonial reform. At the same time, leaders increasingly promote anti-elite rhetoric that paradoxically empowers centralized authority, allowing militaries, religious authorities, or political dynasties to position themselves as defenders of the “authentic people.” This strategy mirrors the core discursive features of Trumpism: vilification of dissent, glorification of strongman leadership, and scepticism toward liberal or international institutions. These trends are further exacerbated by the rejection of global norms, particularly those associated with human rights, transitional justice, and multicultural governance. By labeling such values as “foreign impositions” or remnants of Western neocolonialism, political actors discredit international critique and promote sovereign exceptionalism.

Such developments significantly undermine the core goals of decolonization, which include the cultivation of inclusive political communities, the recovery of marginalized historical narratives, and the dismantling of colonial-era hierarchies of power and identity. Instead, what emerges is a re-inscription of colonial logic under a nationalist guise, where elites reproduce structures of domination while claiming to protect national sovereignty. The region thus experiences what Acharya (2018) describes as “hybrid orders,” in which global discourses of populism are domesticated to serve authoritarian ends, effectively halting the decolonial momentum and pushing Southeast Asia into a new cycle of ideological dependency masked as national revival.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Trumpism, while originating from a distinct American sociopolitical context, has evolved into a transnational discursive force that interacts with local political landscapes often to the detriment of decolonial and democratic efforts. Its appeal lies not merely in ideological content but in the discursive strategies it employs hyper-nationalism, anti-globalism, moral absolutism, and the vilification of dissent (Chakrabarty, 2000). These discourses resonate with postcolonial societies such as those in Southeast Asia, where colonial legacies of centralized authority, racialized governance, and suspicion of foreign interference still shape political imaginaries (Acharya, 2018). By adopting Trumpist rhetoric, Southeast Asian leaders are not simply mimicking a foreign ideology but repurposing it to reinforce pre-existing illiberal tendencies, such as the centralization of power, curtailment of civil liberties, and elevation of dominant ethno-religious identities.

This convergence invites a critical interdisciplinary reflection at the intersection of history and political science. From a historical perspective, the endurance of colonial memory structures, e.g., narratives of national unity forged through exclusion, creates fertile ground for the reassertion of hierarchical nationalism (Mbembe, 2001). Politically, discourse has become a site of struggle, where postcolonial resistance is increasingly challenged by populist-nationalist rhetoric that obscures structural inequalities under the guise of sovereignty (Bayat, 2017). Furthermore, international influence remains a double-edged sword: while global norms and transnational activism can support democratization, they are also framed by populist regimes as neocolonial impositions, thereby undermining local reformist efforts. Southeast Asian societies are thus placed in a difficult position, caught between resisting global ideological intrusions and avoiding internal authoritarian regression.

The spread of these ideas is further supported by social media platforms where emotional and viral content often dominates, creating echo chambers that silence opposing views. In Southeast Asia for instance, where media literacy is still developing, these platforms have played a significant role in making authoritarian populism seem more acceptable or normal. However, resistance is not absent. Civil society actors, youth movements, and regional coalitions have sought to reclaim decolonial narratives, whether through protest, critical pedagogy, or alternative media (Lim, 2023). The response must therefore be multidimensional, involving not just political reform but also cultural and epistemic interventions that challenge dominant historical myths, re-center marginalized voices, and promote pluralistic nationhood. If left unchecked, Trumpism’s global discursive influence risks solidifying a new form of ideological neocolonialism, one that operates not through economic or military dominance, but through symbolic and narrative control over what it means to be sovereign, national, and legitimate.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined how Trumpism, as a global ideological and discursive formation, interacts with and influences political developments in Southeast Asia, particularly in ways that complicate the region’s ongoing postcolonial struggles. By analyzing political rhetoric, media narratives, and leadership styles in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, the paper demonstrates that Trumpism is not confined to the United States but has become a discursively mobile tool that local elites can utilize to reassert authoritarianism, suppress pluralism, and co-opt nationalism. The spread of Trumpist discourse reveals how global ideological flows can reinforce local structures of dominance, undermining both democratization and the deeper cultural-epistemic work of decolonization.

The primary contribution of this research is its effort to reframe Trumpism as a global postcolonial challenge, rather than simply an American political phenomenon. It emphasizes the necessity of viewing populist and

nationalist discourses through a transnational and postcolonial lens, which can help scholars understand how global ideologies mutate when they encounter different historical and political contexts. It also underscores the need for greater interdisciplinary dialogue between history and political science to explore how colonial legacies continue to shape the present in unexpected ways.

Looking forward, there is an urgent need for empirical, localized studies that explore how Trumpist ideologies are appropriated, resisted, or transformed at the grassroots level. Future research could track the long-term effects of these ideological intrusions on civil society, democratic institutions, and identity formation. In particular, comparative work across Southeast Asian nations can shed light on how regional variation, such as colonial experience, religious pluralism, or economic dependency, shapes the reception and adaptation of Trumpism. As global populism continues to evolve, Southeast Asia's response will be critical not just for regional politics but for the broader global struggle to reclaim postcolonial futures.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

All authors were directly involved in the writing of this journal.

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