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A Comparison of Indonesia and Vanuatu Responses to the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on Climate Change

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Abstract

Climate change is increasingly recognized not only as an environmental challenge but also as a global security issue with profound implications for human well-being. In this context, the 2025 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) represents a significant milestone by clarifying states' legal obligations regarding climate change and reinforcing the development of international climate norms. This article examines why Indonesia and Vanuatu, two archipelagic states highly vulnerable to climate change, have responded differently to the normative framework on states' climate obligations articulated in the Advisory Opinion. The study uses a qualitative research design and draws on securitization theory, human security, and constructivism. The study analyzes Vanuatu as an active norm entrepreneur that has strategically used the ICJ process to advance global climate justice, while examining Indonesia through the case of Manuran Island in Raja Ampat as an illustration of small islands' vulnerability to climate-related threats. The findings indicate that the two countries' contrasting responses are shaped not solely by shared vulnerability but by differences in threat perception, political-economic structures, and the domestic internalization of international norms. Vanuatu frames climate change as an existential security threat and actively promotes stronger global legal commitments. In contrast, Indonesia approaches climate change primarily through a development-oriented framework, showing selective norm internalization aligned with national priorities. These findings highlight that state responses to climate change are socially constructed rather than determined by vulnerability alone. The article contributes to International Relations scholarship by demonstrating that small states can exercise significant influence in global norm formation through international legal and diplomatic mechanisms in pursuit of climate justice.

Keywords: Advisory Opinion; Constructivism; Human Security; Indonesia; Vanuatu

Abstrak

Perubahan iklim kini dipahami bukan hanya sebagai persoalan lingkungan, tetapi sebagai isu keamanan global yang berdampak langsung terhadap kehidupan manusia. Dalam konteks ini, Advisory Opinion Mahkamah Internasional (ICJ) tahun 2025 mengeluarkan nasihat yang berisi kewajiban negara terhadap perubahan iklim. Posisi ini menandai perkembangan penting dalam pembentukan norma hukum internasional. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis mengapa Indonesia dan Vanuatu, sebagai dua negara kepulauan yang sama-sama rentan terhadap perubahan iklim, menunjukkan respons yang berbeda terhadap kerangka norma tentang kewajiban negara yang ditegaskan dalam Advisory Opinion tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan kerangka analisis yang mengintegrasikan teori sekuritisasi, human security, dan konstruktivisme. Studi ini menempatkan Vanuatu sebagai aktor yang berperan aktif dalam mendorong pembentukan norma global melalui mekanisme ICJ, sementara Indonesia dianalisis melalui studi kasus Pulau Manuran di Raja Ampat sebagai representasi kerentanan pulau kecil. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan perbedaan respons kedua negara tidak semata ditentukan oleh tingkat kerentanan, tetapi oleh cara negara memaknai perubahan iklim, struktur ekonomi-politik, serta proses internalisasi norma internasional. Vanuatu membingkai perubahan iklim sebagai ancaman besar dan bertindak sebagai norm entrepreneur dengan mendorong penguatan norma global. Sebaliknya, Indonesia cenderung memposisikan perubahan iklim dalam kerangka pembangunan dan menunjukkan pola selective norm internalization. Norma global diadopsi secara terbatas sesuai dengan kepentingan nasional. Temuan ini menegaskan respons negara terhadap perubahan iklim sebagai isu keamanan global bersifat tidak seragam dan sangat dipengaruhi oleh konstruksi kepentingan nasional. Artikel

ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan kajian hubungan internasional dengan menunjukkan negara kecil dapat memainkan peran penting dalam pembentukan norma global. Vanuatu aktif pada tingkat internasional bukan hanya karena rentan, tetapi karena saluran internasional merupakan instrumen politik yang tersedia bagi negara kecil seperti Vanuatu untuk memperjuangkan keadilan iklim.
***Kata kunci**: Advisory Opinion; Konstruktivisme; Human Security; Indonesia; Vanuatu*

INTRODUCTION

Climate change affects various aspects of human life (Adger et al., 2022). Like many other parts of the world, Indonesia is also experiencing its effects. Countries worldwide are experiencing droughts, rising sea levels, rising temperatures, crop failures, famine, and a wide range of other effects. The IPCC reports that the global temperature rise, which has exceeded 1.1°C since the pre-industrial era, is increasingly fuelling and exacerbating threats to human security, including food crises, extreme disasters and social vulnerability (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022).

It is estimated that between 3.3 and 3.6 billion people are affected by the climate crisis (IPCC, 2023). This threat is particularly dangerous for small island nations such as Vanuatu and other small island states, which will experience rising sea levels every year despite their relatively small contribution to emissions. Nevertheless, Vanuatu is not sitting idly by: its young people, known as Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change, a group of young men and women from the Pacific Islands concerned about climate issues in their countries, brought these issues to the international stage. Finally, on 23 July 2025, the International Court of Justice issued its advisory opinion, known as the ICJ Advisory Opinion on the obligations of states regarding climate change.

The court's 15 judges subsequently approved the opinion unanimously (International Court of Justice [ICJ], 2025). Although not directly binding, this advice is regarded as a "defining legal moment" and carries significant legal and moral authority. It will pave the way for further legal action, including mechanisms for "Loss and Damage" or compensation from emitting countries to those that are particularly vulnerable to climate change.

As an archipelago also affected by climate change, Indonesia has experienced a wide range of natural disasters as a result. Several small islands, such as Gebe Island, Gag Island and Manuran Island, are facing a 'mini-apocalypse' due to climate change (Topatimasang & Mahmudi, 2024). This research case study focused on Manuran Island. Manuran Island, in Raja Ampat Regency, covers approximately 746.86 hectares and is highly vulnerable to climate change because of its limited land area and heavy reliance on coastal and marine ecosystems. Climate change has evolved beyond an environmental issue; it has become a global security issue linked to human security. This issue is not only a matter of national concern, but is shaping new global norms in international law that emphasise 'common but differentiated responsibilities'.

In this case study, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an Advisory Opinion following a proposal by law students from various Pacific Island nations, ultimately represented by Vanuatu, which announced its intention to request an advisory opinion on climate change. This guidance reaffirms states' obligations to prevent and address the impacts of climate change, while also creating scope for state accountability, particularly for high-emissions countries. For small island states such as Vanuatu, this is an important tool in the fight for climate justice at the global level, whilst for countries such as Indonesia,

it presents a challenge in translating global norms into national policy, particularly when it comes to protecting vulnerable areas such as small islands.

Despite sharing the same exposure to climate change as archipelagic states, Indonesia and Vanuatu have responded in markedly different ways. Vanuatu has framed climate change as an existential security threat and, through the initiative that led to the ICJ Advisory Opinion, has acted as a norm entrepreneur promoting stronger global legal commitments. Indonesia, by contrast, took part in the ICJ proceedings but approaches climate change mainly as a development issue, and its domestic practice does not always match the norms it endorses, as illustrated by a nickel mining license on Manuran Island that covers an area larger than the island itself (Topatimasang & Mahmudi, 2024).

Given this difference, this study poses one main question: Why do Indonesia and Vanuatu respond differently to the normative framework on states' climate obligations articulated in the ICJ's 2025 Advisory Opinion, particularly from the perspective of human security and climate change as a global security issue? In this article, the normative framework refers specifically to states' obligations regarding climate change as clarified in the ICJ's Advisory Opinion of 23 July 2025, which draws on instruments such as the Paris Agreement, the UNFCCC, UNCLOS, and customary international law. Response is examined at two levels: first, each state's engagement in the process through which this framework developed, namely Vanuatu's initiative and Indonesia's participation in the proceedings; and second, each state's domestic policy practice in relation to the norms that the Advisory Opinion affirms, illustrated by the case of Manuran Island. This question is significant because both countries are vulnerable archipelagic states, yet adopt different approaches and positions in responding to climate change at a global level.

The urgency of this study lies in its aim to bridge the relationship between climate change, human security, and the development of international legal norms more comprehensively, particularly in the context of archipelagic states. Moreover, a gap remains between the evolution of global norms and their implementation at the national level, which can increase the vulnerability of certain regions, such as small islands. This article seeks to examine the factors that cause differences in the responses of Indonesia and Vanuatu to the normative framework on states' climate obligations articulated in the ICJ's 2025 Advisory Opinion. This analysis is conducted from a human security perspective and is situated in the context of climate change as a global security issue and the development of international legal norms through the ICJ's Advisory Opinion, using the case study of Manuran Island, Raja Ampat Regency, as a representation of the vulnerability of small islands in Indonesia.

METHODS

Theories or Conceptual Framework

This study adopts three conceptual frameworks to analyze this issue. At the macro level, this study employs a securitization approach, which explains how climate change is understood not only as an environmental issue but also as a security issue. The second concept is human security, which shifts the focus of analysis from the state to the individual. The final concept used to address this issue is constructivism, which will be used to

analyze why states respond differently to international norms, particularly the ICJ's Advisory Opinion on Climate Change.

Securitization Theory: Climate Change as a Security Issue

In International Relations, scholars increasingly examine climate change through a global security lens because its impact extends beyond the environment to a country's social, economic, and political stability (Barnett, 2003). Barnett and Adger (2007) introduced the concept of a threat multiplier: climate change is not the primary cause of conflict or crisis, but it exacerbates existing vulnerabilities such as poverty, social inequality, and resource constraints. Mach et al. (2019) likewise found that the link between climate change and conflict is indirect and depends on other factors such as the economy and institutions. From the perspective of securitization theory, an issue becomes a security issue when it is framed as an existential threat (Buzan et al., 1998). Climate change has undergone this process through international forums such as the UN and the IPCC. However, critics argue it fails to capture the direct impacts on communities and individuals, which is why the human security approach emerged.

Human Security and Small Island States

The UNDP introduced the concept of human security in 1994 as a people-centered, rather than state-centered, security approach. It encompasses seven dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political. In the context of climate change, the most relevant dimensions are environmental, food, economic, and community security. The World Bank estimates that climate change could result in more than 216 million climate migrants by 2050 (World Bank, 2021).

Vogler (2024) compares Vanuatu and Guam and shows that climate change does not directly cause human insecurity; rather, economic, political, and developmental contexts, as well as colonialism, shape insecurity. Vanuatu experiences tangible climate impacts on food security, resettlement, and local knowledge, whereas insecurity in Guam is shaped by militarisation, tourism, and colonialism. This condition suggests that vulnerability to climate change arises not from natural factors alone but from history and power structures (Vogler, 2024).

Literature on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) complements this perspective. It is well suited to describing Vanuatu as a small island nation and Indonesia as a large archipelagic nation comprising many vulnerable small islands. The IPCC states that small islands face disproportionate risks from sea-level rise, coastal flooding, saltwater intrusion, coral reef degradation, and disruptions to food and water systems (IPCC, 2022). Klöck and Nunn (2019) show that adaptation in SIDS does occur, but its success depends on capacity, governance, and external support. The vulnerability of island states therefore stems not only from their size but also from their position within the global political economy. Indonesia, as a large archipelago, faces different vulnerabilities because of its territorial division, which are felt most acutely on small islands and in coastal areas. This study uses human security as its primary analytical framework to identify the impacts of climate change on people, assess levels of human vulnerability, and compare conditions in Indonesia and Vanuatu.

Constructivism, Norm Dynamics and Climate Justice

Constructivism views state behavior as shaped not only by material factors such as economic or military power, but also by norms, values, and how a state understands an issue (Wendt, 1999). Norms develop through norm emergence, norm cascades, and norm internalization (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). States do not automatically adopt international norms; they must interpret, adapt, and internalize them in ways shaped by each state's national interests, domestic capacities, and socio-political context (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Within this framework, Vanuatu is analysed as a norm entrepreneur: an active actor that promotes and shapes the dissemination of new international norms and, by bringing the matter before the International Court of Justice, shapes the global discourse on state responsibility rather than acting merely as an affected party. Vanuatu's activism at the international level is therefore not only a consequence of its vulnerability; international channels are political instruments available to small states to advocate for climate justice (Klöck & Nunn, 2019).

Developing countries generally adopt a defensive stance within the international climate regime to protect their national development interests, focusing more on domestic policy than on promoting norms internationally (Najam et al., 2003). From a constructivist perspective, this is understood as selective norm internalization, whereby a state accepts international norms but does not fully apply them, instead adapting them to its domestic interests and circumstances (Fünfgeld, 2015). This pattern is evident in Indonesia, which continues to participate in and support climate policies that have not yet become a primary focus.

Several norms and concepts are central to this debate. The principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) is the key norm governing the distribution of responsibilities among countries, and it underpins the Paris Agreement, albeit in a flexible form (Rajamani, 2016). Climate justice refers to recognizing and fairly addressing inequalities in the causes and impacts of climate change. Those most responsible should bear the greatest burden, and vulnerable groups should receive protection and equal access to solutions. Small island states and developing countries, such as Vanuatu and Indonesia, experience greater impacts despite contributing little to emissions, so the concept calls for shared global responsibility and transparency from high-emitting developed countries. Closely related is Loss and Damage, which refers to unavoidable losses resulting from climate change; since the 19th Conference of the Parties (COP19) and the Warsaw International Mechanism, it has become a key instrument for recognizing such losses, including through claims for compensation against high-emitting countries. Vanuatu has been actively using international law in this effort (Wewerinke-Singh & Salili, 2019).

The latest development in this normative landscape is the 2025 ICJ Advisory Opinion on states' obligations in addressing climate change, which was approved unanimously by the Court's 15 judges. Although it does not have the force of law, it carries significant authority in interpreting states' obligations (ICJ, 2025).

Research Gap and Analytical Framework

The literature indicates that climate change poses a real threat to human security, particularly in island countries, but that social, economic, and political factors mediate its impact. International norms such as CBDR and the ICJ Advisory Opinion strengthen global pressure and obligations on states, yet responses are not uniform; from a constructivist perspective, they depend on a state's capacity, national interests, and position in the international system. Existing studies of climate change from security and human security perspectives remain limited to its impacts on humans and do not directly link them to developments in international law. Because the ICJ Advisory Opinion dates only to 2025, research on this norm remains limited, and no research has yet used Manuran Island as a case study or compared it directly with Vanuatu. This study fills this gap by integrating securitization, human security, and constructivist approaches to analyze why Indonesia and Vanuatu respond differently to the normative framework on states' climate obligations articulated in the ICJ's 2025 Advisory Opinion.

Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach and a comparative case study design to analyze differences in Indonesia's and Vanuatu's responses to the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) 2025 Advisory Opinion on states' obligations in addressing climate change. The author uses a qualitative approach because the study seeks to understand how states construct, interpret, and internalize international norms, resulting in different policy responses. A comparative case study allows an in-depth analysis of two island nations that are both vulnerable to climate change impacts, yet respond differently to developments in international legal norms.

The research analytical framework integrates the theories of securitization, human security, and constructivism. Constructivism provides a foundation for explaining how identities, interests, and meanings regarding climate change are shaped through social interaction and international norms. The theory of securitization is used to analyze how political actors construct climate change as a security issue through discursive practices. Meanwhile, the human security perspective examines climate change's impact on human security, which encompasses the protection of lives, livelihoods, and community well-being, particularly in small island states.

This study uses secondary data only. The data were obtained from the 2025 ICJ Advisory Opinion, official United Nations (UN) documents, UN General Assembly resolutions, written statements by states in the process of requesting an Advisory Opinion, policy documents from the Governments of Indonesia and Vanuatu, and reports from international organizations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It also draws on scientific journal articles, books, and policy reports on climate change, security, international law, and the formation of global norms.

The selection of Indonesia and Vanuatu was based on their shared characteristics as archipelagic states facing climate change threats, yet exhibiting different responses to the development of international norms. Vanuatu is analyzed as a state that actively championed the ICJ Advisory Opinion and served as a norm entrepreneur, advocating for climate justice

through international legal mechanisms. Conversely, Indonesia is examined through the case study of Manuran Island in Raja Ampat as a representation of small islands' vulnerability to climate change, while also exploring how global norms translate into national policy.

Data analysis used qualitative content analysis. The first stage involved identifying narratives, arguments, and framing regarding climate change in international legal documents, national policy documents, and official statements from both countries. The second stage categorized the findings using the concepts of securitization, human security, and norm internalization to understand how each country positions climate change within its policies. The final stage involved a comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences in threat construction, policy orientation, and the process of internalizing international norms between Indonesia and Vanuatu.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section first traces the process that led to the Advisory Opinion, then examines Vanuatu's and Indonesia's positions in turn, and finally explains why their responses differ.

ICJ Advisory Opinion as a Turning Point in the Formation of Global Norms on Climate Change

The Advisory Opinion on the Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change did not come about without reason. In 2019, a group of law students from Pacific island nations proposed seeking this advisory opinion. This group, known as Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change, comprises young people from various Pacific Island countries, including Vanuatu, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Samoa, Tonga, and other Pacific nations. This group emphasized the importance of taking action to tackle climate change, particularly for small island states. In September 2021, Vanuatu announced its intention to request an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on climate change. This move was a positive response to an idea put forward by a group of young people in 2019.

On 29 March 2023, after lobbying other UN member states to support this initiative in the General Assembly, the UN General Assembly finally adopted Resolution 77/276, which formally requested an advisory opinion from the ICJ regarding states' obligations under international law to protect the climate system and the legal consequences of breaching those obligations. Following its approval by the UN General Assembly, the Secretary-General of the United Nations formally submitted the General Assembly's request to the ICJ on 17 April 2023.

After this phase, the ICJ opened submissions of written statements from states and international organizations. This phase is known as global legal participation. Although this process did not run smoothly, Vanuatu ultimately requested an extension of the global legal participation period until 22 January 2024 for submitting statements, and an extension of the deadline for written comments until 22 April 2024. Kiribati, the African Union, and Nauru subsequently requested a further extension of at least four months beyond the already extended deadline. The President of the ICJ issued an order extending the deadline for submitting written statements to 22 March 2024, and the deadline for submitting written comments to 24 June 2024.

On 2 December 2024, the first open plenary session took place in The Hague. Vanuatu was the first country to deliver an oral statement. Representatives from the Republic of Vanuatu who delivered oral statements included Ralph Regenvanu (Special Envoy for Climate Change and the Environment), Arnold Kiel Loughman (Attorney General), and Cynthia Rosah Bareagihaka Houniuhi (Spokesperson, Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change). Finally, on 23 July 2025, the International Court of Justice issued an advisory opinion on states' obligations in addressing climate change. The Court's 15 judges unanimously agreed upon this opinion.

This view affirms that states have an international legal obligation to protect the climate system from anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, in the interests of present and future generations. This obligation derives from various instruments of international law, including the Paris Agreement, the UNFCCC, customary international law, human rights treaties, the law of the sea (UNCLOS), and other environmental treaties (ICJ, 2025).

The Court also emphasized that a state's failure to act, which actually exacerbates the climate crisis, may be regarded as a breach of international law. This condition means a state deemed in breach may be held accountable, including obligations to cease such actions, provide guarantees that similar breaches will not recur, and provide reparations or compensation to affected states and communities. This advisory also states that climate change is closely linked to fulfilling human rights, including the right to life, the right to health, and the right to a clean and healthy environment. These obligations are erga omnes in nature, meaning they apply to the entire international community; consequently, every state has the legitimacy to demand accountability, even when it is not directly affected (ICJ, 2025).

Although not legally binding, this opinion is regarded as a turning point in the development of international law because it carries considerable legal and moral weight. Its existence opens opportunities for further legal action, including claims for compensation by the most affected states against those with high emissions. Furthermore, this opinion affirms that states not bound by climate agreements still have obligations under customary international law.

Put simply, this opinion is like a new map that guides states. Although not directly binding, the map highlights the consequences of disregarding the legal obligations the Court clarified. It affirms that each state is responsible for its actions and their impact within the global system. Emerging from a lengthy process, the Advisory Opinion on the Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change should not be understood merely as a product of international law, but as part of the dynamics of global norm-formation on climate change. From a constructivist perspective, this development reflects a stage in the process of norm emergence leading towards a norm cascade (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Norm emergence and norm cascades are key stages in the norm life cycle in international relations. These two stages show how new rules or standards of behavior emerge, spread, and are widely accepted by states. To explain how such norms can form, an initiative has emerged from the youth group Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change. This situation illustrates that international

norms do not always originate from states; they can also stem from non-state actors. This youth group will subsequently be referred to as the norm initiator, which will encourage the norm entrepreneur, namely Vanuatu, to take the idea to the state level. Vanuatu's subsequent role is that of an active actor promoting the new norm within the international system.

Vanuatu's diplomatic efforts from 2021 until the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 77/276 underscore a systematic endeavor to establish the international legality of this norm. The support from UN member states indicates that the norm concerning states' obligations regarding climate change is now entering a phase of 'norm cascade'. Why? Because an increasing number of international actors are accepting and recognizing this norm.

Following the ICJ's issuance of this Advisory Opinion in 2025, this norm has assumed an increasingly significant position within the international legal system. Although it is merely an advisory opinion and not legally binding, its moral and legal authority is strong enough to serve as a key reference for reinforcing states' obligations.

This process can be explained through constructivism, which frames it as a process leading to the internalization of the norm. At this stage, the norm is not merely recognized but begins to shape the direction of state behavior. The ICJ's Advisory Opinion can be understood as a normative turning point, namely the point at which the norm regarding states' responsibility for climate change undergoes significant reinforcement, both legally and morally.

Vanuatu's Position on Responding to Climate Change

When considering Vanuatu in the context of climate change, it cannot be viewed merely as a country victimized by climate change because of its small size and vulnerability. Vanuatu must be seen as a country that actively frames climate change as a security threat and transforms its vulnerability into an international political strategy.

In Vanuatu's Revised and Enhanced Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) document, the country identifies the climate crisis as a major threat. Subsequently, on 27 May 2022, the Vanuatu Parliament approved a climate emergency declaration. It reaffirmed that climate change is the greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of the people of Vanuatu (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2022).

From a securitization perspective, this move demonstrates the Vanuatu government's success in framing climate change as a threat requiring an extraordinary response. Applying Buzan's logic, an issue can become a security issue not only because of the objective nature of the threat, but also because it can be positioned as a threat to survival (Buzan et al., 1998). Vanuatu does not stop at dialogue, but takes action and translates this into national policy instruments and international diplomacy. Vanuatu's NDC clearly links climate change to the need for adaptation, loss and damage, and protecting present and future generations (UNFCCC, 2022). Climate change in Vanuatu has been securitized by incorporating it into official state documents, parliamentary proceedings, and even international diplomacy.

The threat of climate change in Vanuatu directly affects environmental, food, water, health, economic, and community security. These vulnerabilities are evident in Vanuatu's experience of droughts and tropical cyclones. According to the IPCC report on the El Niño-induced drought of 2015–2016, some households in Vanuatu were forced to rely on contaminated water left at the bottom of their storage tanks. Then, when Tropical Cyclones Judy and Kevin struck in 2023, around three-quarters of the population suffered economic hardship, as many people in Vanuatu work as farmers (IPCC, 2023).

The situation illustrates how climate change acts as a threat multiplier: it is not always the sole cause, but it exacerbates existing vulnerabilities from limited resources and the country's geographical position as a small state. This threat is not merely territorial; it also threatens Vanuatu's social survival. Based on the explanation, the human security approach is crucial. The analysis focuses not on the state, but on the people directly affected. What sets Vanuatu apart is the country's ability to transform its vulnerable position into normative agency. From a constructivist perspective, the way a state's behavior is viewed cannot be determined solely by its material capacity but by how it builds legitimacy and disseminates norms. The country does not remain content in its role as a victim, but utilizes this position through international law to champion climate justice.

Vanuatu serves as a norm entrepreneur within the international climate regime. Through the adoption of Resolution 77/276—in which the UN General Assembly directly adopted the resolution and sought the advice of the International Court of Justice (ICJ)—we see the significant role Vanuatu plays. It is not merely a recipient of international norms, but an active actor promoting new norms regarding state responsibility in addressing climate change (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2023). Through the Vanuatu case study, we can identify three interrelated layers of analysis. From a securitization perspective, the country has, through its laws and policies, successfully positioned climate change as a security issue. Second, from a human security perspective, this threat is real because it significantly affects the right to life for Vanuatu's people. Third, through a constructivist lens, Vanuatu is moving from vulnerability toward normative agency.

This uniqueness sets Vanuatu apart. The country has successfully transformed itself from a victim into an actor. It is not only striving to survive the climate crisis but is also playing a role in shaping the rules governing how other nations must act. Small nations are not always passive; indeed, their vulnerability can serve as the basis for the moral legitimacy to change international norms. It is not merely for the sake of recognition, but to fight for climate justice within the framework of international law; for this is the strength they possess.

Indonesia's Position on Responding to Climate Change: A Case Study of Manuran Island, Raja Ampat

Manuran Island, in Raja Ampat, is a small island covering an area of only around 746.86 hectares. Like other small islands in Raja Ampat, it has become a symbol of small islands' vulnerability. The island lies north of Waigeo, a large island in Raja Ampat. It is so small that, compared to Waigeo, its area is less than 1 percent of Waigeo's total area.

Since 2006, PT Anugerah Surya Pratama (ASP) has taken over this small island, forming a joint venture with Australian and Hong Kong companies to mine nickel reserves in Manuran. In 2018, the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources (ESDM) granted a license covering 1,173 hectares; notably, the license area exceeds the island's area (Topatimasang & Mahmudi, 2024).

This exploitation has caused severe ecological damage on Manuran. Given the island's small size and the scale of exploitation, the community living on Manuran Island has been forced to endure a new ecological disaster, ranging from water pollution to the loss of fishing grounds for local fishermen. The problems are further compounded by ecosystem damage from nickel waste contamination. In ethnographic notes by Roem Topatimasang and Ahmad Mahmudi, interviews with local communities around Manuran Island reveal the emergence of conflict after the first nickel mining operations began in 2006. Viewed through a human security lens, this situation should have been securitized, as it indicates a multidimensional threat to the community; however, Indonesia's decision to grant a license covering an area larger than the island itself offers insight into how Indonesia protects its small islands.

Climate change is viewed here as a threat multiplier (Barnett & Adger, 2007), meaning that it exacerbates the situation on Manuran, where nickel has already been extracted. Thus, climate change exacerbates the vulnerability already created by Manuran Island's geography and the development pressures driven by the country itself.

From a security perspective, this situation illustrates how climate change in Indonesia, particularly on small islands, affects not only the environment but also the economy, food security, and people's livelihoods. Many residents rely on fisheries and natural resources, making them vulnerable. If marine ecosystems are disrupted due to damage to coral reefs or a decline in fish stocks, for instance, people's incomes and food security are also affected. Furthermore, rising sea levels and coastal erosion can threaten homes and infrastructure, thereby further weakening social conditions. In fact, Indonesia faces a contradiction. In terms of regulation, Indonesia has demonstrated its commitment as a signatory to the 1992 Rio Conference, which emphasized sustainable development (United Nations, 1992).

Furthermore, the ratification of UNCLOS through Law No. 17 of 1985 reaffirms Indonesia's status as an archipelagic state. Additionally, Law No. 32 of 2009 states that every Indonesian citizen has the right to a good and healthy environment. These legal foundations raise a major question: what is happening in Indonesia? Why is the response like this?

However, compared with Vanuatu, Indonesia's approach to climate change is less robust in treating it as a security issue. In securitization theory, climate change in Indonesia has not yet been consistently regarded as a major threat requiring extraordinary action at the national level. Although Indonesia recognizes the importance of this issue and participates in international agreements, its policies focus more on development and risk management than on a security-based approach. In other words, Indonesia still treats climate change as a development issue rather than a security issue.

The fact is also evident in Indonesia's national policies, which place greater emphasis on economic development. This

approach is understandable, as the government must balance tackling climate change with meeting domestic development needs. From a constructivist perspective, this indicates that Indonesia does not simply accept global norms at face value, but adapts them to domestic conditions and interests. In international law, Indonesia is also not a leading nation in formulating new rules, as Vanuatu is. Indonesia plays more of a role as a participant that follows international rules, but does so selectively. This role means that while Indonesia accepts international norms on climate change, it implements them in ways tailored to national interests, domestic capabilities, and development priorities. As a result, Indonesia remains active in international forums but is not particularly aggressive in pushing for new legal rules at the global level.

To sum this up, Indonesia's position toward climate change can be seen from two perspectives. First, domestically, Indonesia faces tangible impacts that affect people's lives, particularly on small islands. Secondly, at the international level, Indonesia tends to adopt a cautious, realistic stance, prioritizing the economy, development, and domestic stability over taking a firm stance.

Why do these two countries take different stances?

The differences described above can be explained by three interrelated factors that correspond to the analytical framework of this study: (1) how each state perceives the threat posed by climate change (securitization and human security); (2) the political-economic priorities that shape each state's policy choices; and (3) the extent to which each state internalizes the norms affirmed in the Advisory Opinion (constructivism). The discussion begins with each state's engagement with the Advisory Opinion and then turns to these three factors.

Engagement with the Advisory Opinion

Before delving into the differences in response in greater depth, it is important to note that Indonesia has not adopted a passive stance towards the development of the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on climate change. On the contrary, Indonesia has actively engaged in the process, both through its participation in the proceedings and through efforts to adapt domestic policy. This position is inextricably linked to Indonesia's status as an archipelagic nation vulnerable to climate change.

During the proceedings at the International Court of Justice, Indonesia, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, submitted a written statement and participated in the oral hearing held in December 2024 in The Hague. On 5 December 2024, Indonesia's representatives presented an official statement emphasizing the importance of international legal frameworks, such as the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Paris Agreement, as the foundation for responding to climate change. In the statement, Indonesia also affirmed that environmental protection and human rights in the context of climate change must go hand in hand with the domestic legal framework (ICJ, 2025).

Vulnerability Alone Does Not Explain the Difference

Nevertheless, Indonesia's active engagement at the international level does not necessarily correlate directly with implementation at the domestic level. This condition raises a critical question regarding the consistency between normative commitments and policy practice, which is key to understanding the differences between Indonesia's and Vanuatu's responses. The difference between Indonesia's and Vanuatu's positions on climate change cannot be explained simply by vulnerability. Empirically, both countries face real threats to human security, particularly in coastal areas and on small islands. Therefore, the more relevant question is not which country is more vulnerable, but why that vulnerability results in different political responses.

Factor 1: Threat Perception

From a constructivist perspective, this difference stems from how states construct the meaning of threats and their national interests. Vanuatu interprets climate change as a direct threat to the state's very existence, not merely to the environment or development. This threat is concrete: the loss of territory due to rising sea levels, the increasing intensity of disasters, and even the potential loss of national identity as an archipelagic state. In such circumstances, bringing climate change before the International Court of Justice is a rational step, as international law provides an avenue to hold major powers to account.

In contrast, Indonesia does not face the same existential position. Although it has many vulnerable small islands, Indonesia maintains that these threats do not endanger the survival of the state as a whole. The country still possesses a vast mainland territory, as well as greater economic and institutional capacity. In this context, climate change is not viewed as a threat requiring radical changes in foreign policy, but rather as a challenge of national development that must be managed gradually.

Factor 2: Political-Economic Priorities

However, this explanation is insufficient if it stops merely at differences in structure and capacity. In practice, evidence suggests that environmental issues, particularly those directly affecting communities on small islands, have not yet become a top priority in policy-making. The case of Manuran Island shows that resource exploitation continues despite a legal framework that clearly regulates the protection of the area. Granting mining licenses that even exceed the island's land area reflects a contradiction between formally adopted norms and their implementation on the ground.

Hence, the situation indicates that short-term economic considerations still take precedence over efforts to protect the environment and local communities. Communities on small islands, including indigenous groups who are heavily dependent on the ecosystem, are in fact the parties most affected by these policies. From a human security perspective, a clear gap exists between normative commitments and the protection actually afforded to individuals and communities.

Factor 3: Selective Internalization of Norms

Furthermore, this situation also reveals a tendency towards inconsistency in responding to international norms. On the one hand, Indonesia actively participates in various global forums and expresses its commitment to climate change management. On the other hand, domestic practices show that the implementation of these norms does not always align with the principles espoused. This pattern reflects selective norm internalization, whereby norms are formally accepted but their application is adapted to domestic interests, including economic and political interests.

In contrast, Vanuatu finds itself in a different position. Its limited economic capacity and high vulnerability have, in fact, prompted the country to use international legal instruments as a political strategy. By acting as a norm entrepreneur, Vanuatu is not only responding to climate change but also seeking to shape global norms that can strengthen vulnerable states' position within the international system.

Thus, the difference in response between Indonesia and Vanuatu reflects not only differences in capacity, but also differences in priorities and political choices. Indonesia tends to prioritize economic growth, whilst the protection of the environment and vulnerable communities is often treated as a secondary concern. Conversely, Vanuatu has made climate change a key issue that determines the direction of its national and international policies. The statement means that, on climate change, a country's response depends not only on its vulnerability but also on its willingness to prioritize environmental protection and human security in its policies. Taken together, these three factors show that the same normative framework is received differently: Vanuatu uses it to advance climate justice, whereas Indonesia accepts it in principle but adapts its application to development priorities.

CONCLUSION

This article begins with the question of why Indonesia and Vanuatu respond differently to the normative framework on states' climate obligations articulated in the ICJ's 2025 Advisory Opinion, even though both are archipelagic states and both are in a vulnerable position. To answer this, the author uses human security, securitization, and constructivism to examine how the two countries understand and respond to this issue, particularly in the context of the development of international legal norms through the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) Advisory Opinions. The analysis reveals that climate change can no longer be viewed merely as an environmental issue. Communities feel its impacts directly, from losing access to resources to facing threats to their very survival. This fact brings the issue ever closer to the realm of security.

In this context, the ICJ's 2025 Advisory Opinion can be understood as a pivotal moment that clarifies states' legal responsibility to protect the climate system. Interestingly, this process did not come about through the actions of major powers, but through non-state actors and small states such as Vanuatu, which used the international legal framework to strengthen their positions.

The difference in response between Indonesia and Vanuatu cannot, ultimately,

be explained solely in terms of vulnerability. What is more decisive is how each country interprets this threat. For Vanuatu, climate change threatens the very survival of the nation. It is therefore unsurprising that it has taken more decisive and proactive steps at the international level. Meanwhile, Indonesia tends to view climate change as part of a broader development challenge that must be addressed alongside other priorities, such as economic growth and national stability. This perspective has led Indonesia to adopt a more cautious response, less assertive than Vanuatu's.

On the other hand, this study also reveals a gap between commitment and practice in Indonesia. Formally, Indonesia is quite active in various international forums and has a relatively comprehensive regulatory framework. However, at the implementation level, particularly in vulnerable areas such as small islands, inconsistencies persist. The case of Manuran Island demonstrates that environmental and community protection have not yet become top priorities, particularly when pitted against economic interests. Ultimately, we conclude that, whilst international norms are recognized in Indonesia, they are not always consistently applied in practice.

The difference in the responses of Indonesia and Vanuatu reflects more the different ways the two countries structure and prioritize their interests than a difference in vulnerability alone. Responses to climate change are ultimately shaped by how a country perceives the threat, as well as how willing it is to prioritize environmental and community protection in its policies.

More broadly, these findings offer several important insights for the study of International Relations. First, small states are not always passive; they can play a significant role in driving change at the global level. Second, international norms are not automatically followed uniformly by all states, but are subject to interpretation and adaptation to domestic conditions. Third, the human security approach matters because it helps view the impacts of climate change from the perspective of the communities most affected, rather than solely from the state's perspective.

This study concludes that climate change is not merely an environmental issue, but also a matter of political choice. How states respond to this issue shows how they balance economic interests, global pressures, and the protection of their own populations. Looking ahead, it will be interesting to see whether the norms arising from the ICJ's Advisory Opinion will genuinely influence state policy, or whether they will remain formal commitments without significant changes on the ground.

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