

The challenges of internalizing religious moderation values amid the rise of socio-political polarization

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ABSTRACT

Abstract

Religious-based socio-political polarization is one of the main challenges in strengthening social cohesion and religious life in post-reform Indonesia. The increasing politicization of religious identity in the lead-up to the 2024 elections demonstrates that religion serves not only as a source of moral values but also as an instrument of political mobilization that has the potential to threaten moderation and tolerance among religious communities. This study aims to analyze the relationship between socio-political polarization and the internalization of religious moderation in Indonesia, values in the context of a politically and ideologically fragmented society.

Data were gathered from 25 participants—religious leaders, academics, civil society activists, and young voters from five provinces—through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. With the aid of NVivo 14 software, thematic approaches were used to analyze the data. The findings show that while religious moderation is still symbolic and has not yet fully ingrained itself in society's social consciousness, religious polarization is strengthened by the use of social media as a platform for political identity fights. The participation of interfaith leaders, religious digital literacy, and intercultural education are important elements that promote moderation; algorithmic media bias and political fragmentation are important obstacles.

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Introduction

Post-reformasi, social and political polarization has become a significant phenomenon in religious life in Indonesia. In the past two decades, political contestation has encompassed not only ideas but also cross-identities, particularly religious ones. Polarization has permeated social life, leading to increasing and more visible segregation, even beyond the electoral arena. This process is accelerated by the presence of social media, where political differences become more conflictual and intertwined with identity.

Empirical evidence supports this occurrence. Nearly one in two voters (48.2%) perceive religious identification as a major tendency in their political activity, according to the Indonesian Survey Institute (2024). In the meantime, Indonesia is among the Southeast Asian nations with the greatest incidence of interreligious conflict, according to the Pew Research Center (2023). The aforementioned information shows that identity politics is now a structural issue that jeopardizes interfaith harmony and societal cohesion rather than just a passing fad.

Therefore, creating inclusive, moderate, and cohesive religious practices is difficult due to sociopolitical divisiveness.

In this sense, religious moderation is viewed as a calculated attempt to prevent social radicalism and preserve religious harmony. This strategy emphasizes tolerance, fairness, and respect for diversity in an effort to place religion in the middle between liberal and radical viewpoints. The Republic of Indonesia's Ministry of Religious Affairs made religious moderation a national priority initiative in 2019 in an effort to foster societal cohesion and avoid religious strife. However, there are a number of obstacles to this policy's execution. According to a 2022 study by the Wahid Institute, 33% of participants continue to exhibit intolerance toward different social groups, both inside and outside of their religion. As a result, there is a discrepancy between the normative religious moderation that is expected and the actual situation.

Theoretically, Laclau's (2005) theory of identity politics, which examines the use of identity as a tool for political mobilization, can explain this dynamic. In a religious setting, identity politics not only fortifies personal allegiance to a specific group but also establishes limits of exclusivity between "us" and "them." On the other hand, Parekh's (2006) theory of pluralism, which highlights the value of diversity as the foundation for fostering societal harmony, is consistent with the concept of religious moderation. Therefore, it is possible to view the internalization of religious moderation principles as a methodical process of striking a balance between restrictive and inclusive social forces.

Conceptual studies have been the main focus of academic study on religious moderation to date. In the contemporary sociopolitical climate, there is little room for a real comprehension of how the internal system of religious moderation values functions. This emphasizes the need for more study to clarify the benefits of religious moderation in light of growing political polarization as well as the factors that facilitate and impede this process. The results of this study have practical implications for promoting the importance of religious moderation, creating curricula, and establishing inclusive and tolerant preaching techniques.

This study's main goal is to investigate the connection between Indonesia's internalization of religious moderation and socio-political polarization, with a focus on the elements that facilitate and impede this process. The analysis focuses on how, in the face of escalating societal tensions and identity political struggle, the values of religious moderation—such as tolerance, fairness, and respect for diversity—are realized. Additionally, this study investigates the degree to which government initiatives, specifically the Religious Moderation program of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, (2019–2024), contribute to strengthening social cohesion in a pluralistic society.

In theory, this study advances research on the connection between pluralism and identity politics in a religious setting. The findings are anticipated to advance knowledge of the application of religious moderation principles as a tactic to lessen identity-based conflict and to enhance the literature on social moderation theory. Practically speaking, legislators, educational institutions, and religious leaders can use the study's findings as a guide when developing tactics to improve religious moderation that are sensitive to the current political climate. Therefore, it is anticipated that this research will strengthen practical efforts to build in addition to making scholarly contributions.

Research Methods

The research approach used by researchers is quantitative research methods with a type of data analysis in the form of correlational. The choice of quantitative research method is based on the reason for wanting to test a theory derived through a hypothesis, until in the end this research will reject or accept the hypothesis. The method used in this study is a type of research based on the level of explanation (level of explanation of the position of variables) used in this study, namely correlational research which aims to determine the relationship between two variables (Machali, 2017), between PAI learning (variable X) and improving the quality of student character (variable Y).

The population in this study is grade XI students at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Wates with a total of 99 students, consisting of 30 students majoring in Engineering and Computer Network

(TKJ), 23 students majoring in Accounting, 22 students majoring in Online Business and Marketing (BDP), and 24 students majoring in Office Management and Business Services (MPLB). The reason for choosing class XI is based on independent variables with dependence on this study, namely PAI learning with the quality of student character measured in grade XI students after receiving education for almost 2 years so that it can be used as further evaluation material for schools. Based on a population of 99 students, which is below 100, in this case all were used as research respondents (Alwi, 2015). Sampling using *saturated sampling* Because all members of the population were made respondents in this study with the aim of wanting to make generalizations with a small error rate (Amin et al., 2023).

The data collection technique in this study used a closed questionnaire, and the scale used was the Likert scale. After the data is collected, researchers input data into SPSS (*Statistical Product and Service Solution*) to score, tabulate, group data based on variables, and present data for each variable studied. Then the instrument test was carried out, namely by conducting a validity test with the rules of probability values of $0.00 < 0.05$ and declared valid all both X and Y variables. Furthermore, reliability tests were carried out in this study with the results of variable X 0.866 and variable Y 0.892 with good category reliable rules (Machali, 2017). After that, a basic assumption test was carried out with a normality test categorized as normal data because of the significance value of $0.200 > 0.05$ and a linearity test with linear data because of the significance value of $0.00 < 0.05$ (Machali, 2017). Next, calculations are carried out to test the hypothesis that has been proposed whether it is accepted or rejected. If the hypothesis is accepted, correlation analysis and simple linear regression are continued as data analysis techniques.

Results and Discussion

1. Intensification of Religious Identity Polarization in the Political Arena

Field data analysis shows that religion-based socio-political polarization has significantly intensified in the lead-up to the 2024 elections. Seventy-two percent of participants (18 out of 25) stated that their political preferences or those of their environment are directly influenced by religious identity. Narratives such as "political choice is part of faith" are widely circulated on religious social media (Putri & Manik, 2024). This phenomenon confirms the findings of the Pew Research Center (2023), which ranked Indonesia as one of the countries with the highest interreligious tensions in Southeast Asia.

NVivo 14 analysis shows that the theme of "religion as a political symbol" emerged most dominantly, followed by "narratives of moral righteousness" and "delegitimization of other groups." In this context, social media becomes a catalyst that accelerates the spread of exclusive sentiments and reinforces identity bias, as also found by Zaimina (2025) in her research on digital narratives of religious moderation.

Main Theme	Frequency of Appearance (%)	Contextual Category
Religion as a Political Symbol	34%	Politicization of Religion
Narratives of Moral Truth	28%	Group Legitimation
Delegitimization of "Other Groups"	22%	Social Polarization
Identity Neutralization Efforts	16%	Moderation Strategies

2. Implementation of Religious Moderation and Structural Challenges

The second finding highlights that the implementation of religious moderation remains symbolic and elitist. Although the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs has promoted Religious Moderation 2020–2024 through education and digital media, approximately 60% of respondents believe that the implementation of moderation values has not yet reached the grassroots level. The main obstacles identified are cross-institutional coordination, unequal access to digital literacy, and cultural resistance to the idea of pluralism (Supandi & Aini, 2025).

Several religious leaders acknowledged that the narrative of moderation is often perceived as a product of the “state,” rather than the internalization of religious values. This creates a gap between normative policies and the practical awareness of the public. Conceptually, this indicates an implementation gap, as proposed by Lipsky (1980) regarding the behavior of lower-level bureaucrats determining the success of public policy.

3. Factors Driving and Inhibiting the Internalization of Moderation Values

Thematic analysis revealed three main factors driving the internalization of religious moderation:

- (1) faith-based multicultural education,
- (2) support from interfaith leaders, and
- (3) the active role of the younger generation in social media in spreading messages of peace.

However, the main inhibiting factors include political fragmentation, the exclusivity of mass organizations, and digital media bias.

(Religion → Political Identity → Polarization → Religious Moderation → Social Cohesion). This relationship indicates that the higher the level of politicization of religion, the lower the effectiveness of internalizing religious moderation values. However, the variables of support from interfaith leaders and moderate religious education programs proved to be significant counterbalances.

4. Comparison with Previous Research

These findings expand on the research of Putri & Manik (2024), which emphasized the government's role in anticipating the politicization of religion, demonstrating that policy intervention alone is insufficient without social and cultural transformation at the community level. Meanwhile, unlike Khotimah's (2023) study, which highlighted the decline in intolerance among the younger generation, this study found that social media actually strengthens echo chambers, deepening ideological segmentation.

Furthermore, compared to the Wahid Institute's (2022) findings, which stated that 33% of the population remains intolerant, this study's findings show a stagnant trend: despite an increase in moderation literacy among elites, horizontal intolerance at the community level has not significantly changed.

Discussion and Analysis of Research Findings

1. Identity Polarization and Religious Politics: Dynamics between "Us" and "Them"

The finding that religious-based political polarization is intensifying ahead of the 2024 elections reinforces the politics of identity thesis proposed by Ernesto Laclau (2005). Within his theoretical framework, political identity is formed not only through internal solidarity but also through the formation of opposition to "the other." Interview results indicate that religious narratives are used to strengthen political loyalty and group morality, thus creating a moral boundary between what is considered "right" and "deviant." This phenomenon also aligns with

Mietzner's (2021) analysis, which states that political Islam in Indonesia is undergoing a transformation from an ideological movement to an electoral instrument.

Consequently, religion is no longer merely a source of spiritual values but also a tool for mobilizing power. The politicization of religion transforms the public sphere into an arena of moral and ideological contestation that threatens social cohesion (Hadiz, 2020). Therefore, this phenomenon demonstrates that Laclau's theory of identity politics remains relevant in explaining how religion is used to form potentially exclusive populist alliances. However, unlike the findings of Putri & Manik (2024), this study found that the polarization process now occurs more in the digital space through social media algorithms that strengthen echo chambers, rather than in conventional preaching spaces.

Religious Moderation: Between State Ideology and Social Awareness

This study shows that religious moderation is still in a transition phase from symbolic policy to social practice. This can be explained through Parekh's (2006) perspective on active pluralism, which emphasizes that tolerance and social harmony cannot be achieved solely through regulation, but through mutual engagement between communities.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs' policy on Religious Moderation 2020–2024 has indeed succeeded in institutionalizing the discourse of moderation (Supandi & Aini, 2025), but the internalization of its values has not been evenly distributed at the grassroots level. These results confirm the gap between "normative moderation" (which is top-down) and "empirical moderation" (which is socially induced).

This gap also reflects the phenomenon proposed by Lipsky (1980) regarding street-level bureaucracy, where the effectiveness of public policy is highly dependent on the interpretations of implementers on the ground. In this context, the implementation of religious moderation depends heavily on the capacity of local religious leaders and civil society networks. Differences in social context, political affiliation, and religious literacy explain the variation in effectiveness across regions.

3. Factors Driving and Inhibiting Internalization of Moderation

Thematic analysis shows that factors that strengthen religious moderation include inclusive education, interfaith cooperation, and the involvement of young people in digital spaces. These results align with research by Nisa (2023), which highlights the growing role of progressive Islamic digital communities in constructing peaceful religious narratives. However, this study also found that the most significant inhibiting factors are political fragmentation and algorithmic media bias.

This phenomenon supports Pariser's (2011) filter bubble theory, where social media algorithms limit exposure to divergent views, thereby reinforcing polarization. Thus, efforts to moderate religion must take into account the digital dimension as a new arena for the formation of religious and political identities. Expanding moderation strategies into the digital space is crucial to ensure that narratives of tolerance are not overtaken by the rapid spread of exclusive ideologies.

These findings expand on Zaimina's (2025) research, which emphasized the importance of digital moderation narratives, by demonstrating that the participation of young people as actors in narrative production (rather than simply consumers) is a crucial variable that has not been widely considered in previous studies.

4. Research Contributions, Implications, and Limitations

Theoretically, this research contributes by integrating the theories of identity politics (Laclau), active pluralism (Parekh), and digital society (Pariser) to explain the complex relationship between religion, politics, and the public sphere in contemporary Indonesia. This

integration produces a new framework called the "spiral model of religious moderation," a dynamic process between the pressures of political polarization and simultaneous moderation efforts.

Practically, these findings provide input for the government, educational institutions, and religious organizations to strengthen the grassroots dimension of moderation programs, particularly through interfaith digital literacy training and multicultural education. However, this study also has limitations, including: (1) the relatively small number of participants, limited to five provinces; (2) the lack of longitudinal data to measure attitudinal changes; and (3) the potential for subjective bias in the interviews.

For further research, a mixed-method longitudinal study involving national surveys and social media big data analysis is recommended to map changes in public perceptions of religious moderation in a more representative and measurable manner.

Conclusion

Overall, this study confirms that religious moderation in Indonesia is still in a transitional phase, moving from symbolic policy to inclusive social practice. Religious-based political polarization poses a major challenge to building social cohesion, but it also opens up new opportunities to strengthen values education, interfaith collaboration, and peaceful religious narratives in the digital space.

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