



Reaffirming Religious Moderation as a Pillar Against Identity Politics in Indonesia

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Abstract

In recent years, identity politics has been increasingly used in political contests in Indonesia. Identities such as religion, ethnicity, and race are exploited by political actors to gain support, often in ways that divide society. This raises concerns about the disruption of national unity. In such situations, religious moderation becomes an important approach to maintaining social harmony. Religious moderation emphasizes fairness, balance, tolerance, and respect for diversity. This study aims to examine how religious moderation can be a strategy in dealing with identity politics that has the potential to undermine national unity. The method used is a literature study with a descriptive qualitative approach. Data was obtained from scientific journals, books, and relevant national policy documents from the past 10 years. The results of the study show that although the concept of religious moderation has become part of government policy, its implementation in society still faces many challenges, such as a lack of understanding at the community level and the use of religious issues in politics by the elite. Therefore, strategies to strengthen moderation need to be implemented through inclusive education, the involvement of religious and community leaders, digital campaigns that appeal to the younger generation, and the strengthening of social activities that foster cooperation across groups. With these steps, religious moderation can become a real force in building a peaceful, inclusive, and united Indonesia.

Keywords: Religious Moderation, Identity Politics, Tolerance, Unity, Social Strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country with a very high level of social diversity. Comprising more than 17,000 islands, home to over 270 million people from hundreds of ethnic groups, regional languages, and six officially recognized religions, Indonesia is rightly referred to as a pluralistic nation. This diversity is a valuable asset in enriching national identity, yet it also harbors the potential for conflict, especially when such differences are politicized. In the last two decades, especially after the 1998 reform, democratization in Indonesia has opened up wider political participation. However, along with increased freedom, exclusive political practices have also emerged, such as identity politics. Identity politics refers to political strategies that utilize the identities of certain groups, such as religion, ethnicity, or race, to gain political support (Ruslan et al., 2022). In some cases, this strategy not only builds group awareness, but also encourages the formation of an “us” versus “them” identity, which ultimately exacerbates social polarization (Ardipandanto, 2020).

This phenomenon is clearly evident in various political contests in Indonesia, including the 2024 presidential election. At that time, issues of religion and cultural identity were used extensively in political campaigns, both directly and covertly (Yusuf & Hidayah, 2024). Social media is often used to spread messages that only defend certain groups and are sometimes provocative, thereby exacerbating divisions within society. This situation is certainly worrying because it can undermine the national order that has been built on the principles of tolerance and unity.

This situation becomes even more complex when political dynamics in Indonesia are often not based on substantive ideas and concepts, but rather on the mobilization of collective identities and emotions. Identity politics, laden with narratives of exclusivism, has become an effective tool for winning votes, as it arouses feelings of pride within certain groups and suspicion towards other groups (Oktaviarani & Maulia, 2024). If left unchecked, this kind of politics can undermine national



unity and diminish the quality of democracy. Politics becomes simply a matter of who is “us” and who is “them,” rather than who has the best ideas for building the country (Ardipandanto, 2020).

At this moment, religious moderation is an important priority. Religious moderation is a way of thinking, attitude, and religious practice that upholds balance, respects differences, rejects extremism, and promotes fairness and tolerance (Iskandar Zulkarnain et al., 2025). This concept does not encourage people to be “neutral” in their religion, but rather not to bring extreme religious values into the public sphere to the extent that they negate other groups. In other words, religious moderation does not mean weakening one's faith, but rather acting as a buffer so that religious expression does not become a source of social conflict.

The Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, has officially made religious moderation one of its national strategic programs, even including it in the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (Miftah et al., 2023). The aim is to strengthen interfaith harmony, prevent the spread of radical ideology, and reaffirm the importance of unity in diversity. However, the implementation of this program still faces many challenges, especially in a political environment that tends to be pragmatic and exploits sectarian issues to win votes. At the community level, understanding of religious moderation also varies widely. Many people do not fully understand its meaning and urgency, and some even view it as an attempt to “tame” religious teachings. This indicates that the religious moderation program has not been effectively disseminated, let alone integrated into the practice of national and state life.

Therefore, instilling values of moderation cannot be solely the responsibility of the government. There must be cooperation from all parties: religious leaders, teachers, the media, community activists, and even social media users. They all have an important role to play in spreading messages of peace, respecting differences, and rejecting divisive narratives. Hendra et al. (2023) emphasizes that messages of moderation must also be conveyed using a local cultural approach so that they are more easily accepted by the community. Rigid or overly formal messages often fail to touch people's hearts.

Although the government has established religious moderation as a national program and it has been widely discussed in various forums, in reality, its implementation in the field is still not optimal. Many studies focus on moderation to counter radicalism, but not many discuss how this moderation can be directly applied to deal with increasingly strong identity politics (Miftah et al., 2023). The existing literature has mostly focused on moderation from a religious and theological perspective. However, the challenge we face today is not only how to understand religious teachings, but also how this moderate attitude can shape the behavior of citizens so that they are not easily provoked by misleading political issues. Khulwah, (2023) He even reminded us that moderation should be a real cultural movement in everyday life, not just a program imposed from above.

Therefore, this study will fill that gap. The aim is to examine in greater depth how religion can be used as a force to counter identity politics that undermine unity. The hope is that through this study, we can find new ways to strengthen the spirit of nationalism that cannot be easily divided by differences in identity. This country needs an approach that addresses the root of the problem, not just formal policies, but strategies that can truly touch the hearts of the people. Therefore, religious moderation must be seen as a cultural and political force that can protect the nation from division, not merely a moral concept without concrete action. (Iskandar Zulkarnain, Rahmawati, & Rachmad, 2025).

2. METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research method. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring the concept, dynamics, and relevance of religious moderation in facing the challenges of political identity in Indonesia. The data sources in this study come from various relevant literature, such as national and international scientific journals and



academic books. The criteria for selecting literature refer to recency (maximum 10 years old), relevance to the topic, and the credibility of the source. Some of the secondary data examined also came from previous research published through platforms such as SINTA, DOAJ, and Google Scholar.

The collected data were analyzed using content analysis techniques. This technique was used to identify, clarify, and categorize various perspectives, strategies, and challenges related to religious moderation practices and their connection to identity politics in Indonesia. This study did not use quantitative instruments such as questionnaires or structured interviews because the main focus was on conceptual and reflective analysis of public discourse, policies, and the thoughts of academics and community leaders. Therefore, the validity of the research is maintained through source triangulation, which involves comparing findings from various different literature sources to obtain objective and credible conclusions.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Conceptual Study of Religious Modernization and Identity Politics

Religious moderation is a way of thinking, attitude, and behavior in practicing religious teachings that is neither excessive (extreme) nor neglectful of religious principles (liberal) (Muhamad Maftuh Fauzi, 2025). This concept emphasizes a balance between religious values and tolerance, justice, and respect for diversity. Moderation is important in Indonesia's diverse society so that everyone can live in harmony and respect one another. There are several principles of religious moderation, namely:

1. Commitment to national values and Pancasila;
2. Tolerance for differences in beliefs and cultures;
3. Rejection of violence in any form, and
4. Openness to local culture as long as it does not conflict with religious principles.

Based on this principle, religious moderation is not intended to mix religions, but rather as an effort to place religion in a constructive role in building harmony and unity. Identity politics is a political strategy that uses group identities such as religion, ethnicity, race, or culture as a tool to gain mass support (Majid & Amirulkamar, 2023). In a democratic system, fighting for the rights of certain groups is normal. However, when identity is used exclusively and with the aim of attacking or discrediting other groups, identity politics can cause social division (Ibrahim et al., 2024). In Indonesia, the symptoms of identity politics have become increasingly apparent since the reform era. Many political actors use religious sentiment to strengthen their influence, especially during general elections. This is exacerbated by the spread of misinformation on social media, which often triggers prejudice and hostility between community groups. If not anticipated, identity politics can damage national unity and undermine the quality of democracy in Indonesia..

Religious Moderation as a Fundamental Value for Maintaining Nationality

Religious moderation has great potential to be used as a national strategy capable of balancing religious expression in the public sphere. In a multicultural society such as Indonesia, religious moderation promotes the principles of justice, mutual respect, and openness to differences. This concept is very important in reducing social tensions caused by excessive politicization of religion, which often occurs during electoral political moments. (Kurniawan & Afifi, 2023). Moderation can balance personal beliefs with the public interest, especially in open public spaces such as social media or the political arena. When someone is able to practice their religion calmly, without imposing their will on others, and while continuing to respect the rights of others, the likelihood of identity-based conflict can be reduced. In this context, moderation is not merely a moral teaching but a social strategy to prevent national fragmentation caused by identity-based provocation that leads to horizontal polarization.



Identity Politics and the Exploitation of Religion in the Political Arena

Identity politics in Indonesia has developed into a systematic strategy that exploits religious symbols on a massive scale, especially in the run-up to elections. Political actors do not hesitate to use religious arguments or symbols to build support bases, even though this is often accompanied by hate speech and discriminatory attitudes towards other groups. This phenomenon is particularly striking in the digital space. Alamsyah et al. (2024) Noting that platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have become new battlegrounds for biased and tendentious religious narratives. Many anonymous accounts spread content that targets specific religions or groups with the aim of strengthening certain political positions. In this case, religion, which should be a source of peace, is instead being used as an exploitative political tool. Such conditions create dangerous social tensions because society is unconsciously being directed to choose based on religious identity rather than the quality of the candidates.

Implementation of Religious Moderation in Policy and Society

The Indonesian government has actually made religious moderation a national priority program. This is reflected in the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) and various policies of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. However, the implementation of this policy in the field still faces major challenges. Many people do not fully understand the meaning of religious moderation. Some even consider this program to be a form of “obfuscation” of religious teachings or merely government jargon.

Nazlia et al. (2024) mentions that one of the causes of this low level of understanding is the lack of a cultural approach in program socialization. Many socialization programs are still formal and centralized in nature, without actively involving local figures who are more trusted by the community. In fact, religious and community leaders have a key role in translating the concept of moderation into everyday practices that can be understood and accepted by the grassroots community. Zuhri & Bakhrudin (2021) He added that the success of spreading religious moderation would be more effective if it were packaged in the form of local narratives that touch on the daily lives of the community, such as the traditions of mutual cooperation, interfaith cooperation, and the culture of deliberation. In this way, moderation would no longer be seen as an elite project, but rather as part of the culture of living together.

The Challenge of Moderation in Countering Identity Politics

One of the biggest challenges to religious moderation today is the rapid flow of extreme information through social media. The echo chamber phenomenon causes individuals to only interact with information that aligns with their views, thereby reinforcing bias and deepening polarization (Alfifa et al., 2025). Social media algorithms indirectly create an information silo that encourages radicalization of opinion. In addition to digital challenges, Indonesia’s political conditions also exacerbate the situation. Many political elites are not truly consistent in rejecting identity politics. In practice, religious issues are still used as campaign weapons, both directly and through social media influencers. This indicates that the challenge for moderation is not only at the societal level but also within the power structures that have not fully supported a healthy and inclusive political climate

Strategies to Strengthen Religious Moderation to Counter Identity Politics

The following are several strategies that can be taken to strengthen the position of religious moderation as an antidote to identity politics:

1. Integration of moderation values into the education curriculum

One of the most fundamental strategies for strengthening religious moderation is through education. Both formal and non-formal education curricula need to systematically incorporate values of moderation from elementary school to university. Values such as tolerance, openness to



differences, and a spirit of togetherness must be internalized through subjects such as Religious Education, Civics, and History. Teachers, as the frontline, must be equipped with training to effectively communicate messages of moderation in a communicative and non-dogmatic manner. With this approach, students not only understand moderation as a concept but also apply it in their daily lives. Instilling these values from an early age is a crucial investment in shaping a generation resilient to identity-based provocation and intolerance. (Miftah et al., 2023).

2. Strengthening the role of religious leaders in society

Religious and community leaders play a strategic role in conveying the values of moderation to society. They are often respected and trusted role models in their social circles. Therefore, regular training sessions should be conducted for these leaders to ensure they fully understand the essence of religious moderation and can communicate it in a down-to-earth and relevant manner that aligns with community needs. They must be equipped with strong communication skills to engage diverse groups without causing resistance. If these leaders become agents of moderation, the community will find it easier to embrace and apply these values in their daily lives (Novitasari et al., 2024).

3. Utilization of social media and positive influencers

In today's digital age, social media has become the primary space for interaction and opinion formation, especially among the younger generation. Therefore, moderation campaigns cannot be absent from the digital world. Strengthening strategies need to include the massive and creative use of social media, involving influencers who have credibility, a positive track record, and a significant influence on their audience. Content such as short videos, podcasts, infographics, and storytelling can be used to convey moderation messages in an engaging and emotional way. Collaboration between the government, academics, and content creators is crucial to ensure the campaign is not monotonous or overly formal. Additionally, improving digital literacy is an important part of this strategy to prevent the public from falling victim to hoaxes, hate speech, or extreme narratives that are prevalent online. With the right digital approach, the values of moderation can reach segments of society that were previously inaccessible through conventional outreach efforts (Septiyawati et al., 2025).

4. Community empowerment

For religious moderation to truly take root, strengthening strategies must directly engage communities at various levels. This approach emphasizes the importance of involving citizens in designing and implementing moderation programs so that they feel a sense of ownership and are motivated to participate actively. Activities that can be carried out include community discussion forums, interfaith and inter-ethnic cooperation, joint entrepreneurship training, and the organization of cultural events that reflect the spirit of diversity. Community centers, mosques, and other places of worship can be utilized as centers for tolerance literacy, hosting training sessions, discussions, or group viewings of educational films on diversity. When communities are actively engaged, resistance to such programs diminishes, and religious moderation becomes an integral part of daily life, rather than merely a government agenda.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that religious moderation is very important for maintaining national unity in Indonesia, especially in the face of increasingly frequent challenges of identity politics in the political process. Religious moderation does not only mean being fair and non-extreme in religion, but also an effective way to prevent conflict and division resulting from the use of religion in politics. In a diverse society such as Indonesia, moderation can serve as a bridge between groups with different beliefs and cultures. Although the government has made religious moderation a national program, as stated in the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan, its implementation in society still faces many challenges. One of these challenges is the lack of public understanding of the meaning and purpose of religious



moderation. In addition, the use of religious issues by political elites to gain support also hinders the spread of moderate values. This is exacerbated by social media, which often reinforces polarization through misleading and provocative content.

Therefore, the strengthening of religious moderation must be carried out comprehensively and reach all levels of society. Strategic steps that can be taken include: incorporating the values of moderation into the education curriculum from an early age, providing training to religious and community leaders, using social media for attractive and positive campaigns, and encouraging community activities that strengthen cooperation and tolerance. By implementing these strategies, religious moderation will not merely be a concept but can become an integral part of daily life for Indonesian society. The hope is that this nation will grow stronger in maintaining unity and be better equipped to address various forms of division stemming from identity politics.

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