



# Parallel Struggles of Religious Moderation Activists Amid Hindu-Muslim Tensions in India and Political Polarization in Indonesia

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*Received: 3 Juli 2025 | Accepted: 11 Agustus 2025 | Published: 31 Desember 2025*

## Abstract

*The phenomenon of religious and political polarization has created serious pressure on religious moderation work, both in India and Indonesia. In India, interfaith activists who strive to maintain harmony between Hindu and Muslim communities often face stigmatization, labeling themselves as "anti-national," and pressure from the politically dominant majority group. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, religious moderation activists also experience high social and psychological burdens, especially after the 2024 election which was colored by identity sentiment and religious-based disinformation. This article attempts to comparatively review the forms of burnout experienced by moderation activists in both countries, and explain the patterns of structural, digital, and cultural pressures that make tolerance work increasingly vulnerable and marginalized. Through a qualitative approach with literature studies, this article shows that the struggle of moderation activists is not only about defending diversity, but also about surviving amidst increasingly extreme identity politics. These findings invite readers to understand that religious moderation requires social protection, policy support, and strengthening of a healthy digital space to prevent systemic fatigue that can endanger democracy itself.*

**Keywords:** *Religious Moderation, Activist Burnout, Hindu-Muslim, Identity Politics, , Interfaith.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Amidst the increasing socio-political tensions based on identity in various parts of the world, the discourse of religious moderation faces a major challenge. In many democracies, especially those with large multi-religious populations such as India and Indonesia, religion has become a political marker that not only influences electoral preferences but also triggers deeper social segmentation. In this context, voices that promote tolerance, inclusivity, and coexistence are often drowned out by the roar of extremism discourse that is louder, populist, and resonant in the digital space (Mudde, 2007; Roy, 2016). India, since the rise of the BJP and the strengthening of the Hindutva project, has shown how dominant political forces can construct a national identity based on the majority religion. The Muslim minority faces systemic oppression, ranging from exclusionary legislation to religious-based violence that often goes untouched (Jaffrelot, 2021). Tolerant religious narratives are slowly losing ground in the mainstream, and activists who try to build bridges between communities are instead faced with stigmatization, surveillance, and even criminalization (Bacchetta, 2021). In Indonesia, although the constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the post-reformation reality has shown a shift: religion has become an instrument of political mobilization, and sectarian issues have been used as a winning strategy, especially since the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election to the 2024 general election (Hasan, 2018; Mietzner, 2020).

Several studies have observed how tensions between religion and state are manifested in horizontal conflicts, discriminatory regulations, and changes in public culture. In India, classic studies such as Ashutosh Varshney's highlight the importance of civil society institutions in reducing communal conflict (Varshney, 2002). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, research by Burhanuddin and the Wahid Foundation shows an increase in intolerance in public and digital spaces (Wahid Foundation, 2017). However, there is an important gap that has not been widely touched on: how individuals or groups who actively promote moderation not just as a slogan, but as a social and political practice survive and adapt amidst increasingly conservative and diversity-hostile currents (Fealy, 2016).



Attention to moderate actors is crucial because they are the ones working on the front lines to foster interfaith dialogue, maintain diversity, and present alternative peaceful narratives that often escape the media radar. Their existence is not always in line with state institutions or large mass organizations; many of them actually operate autonomously, based on communities, and often face double risks: pressure from the state, stigma from fellow citizens, and digital violence (Künkler & Stepan, 2013). Their experiences are a reflection of the ideological struggle that is taking place silently but determining the direction of democracy in the future.

Moreover, in the digital era, this struggle no longer only takes place in physical space. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become new arenas where religious narratives are produced, contested, and distributed massively. While extremist content often receives algorithmic incentives in the form of high visibility, moderate messages struggle to reach a wider audience (Tufekci, 2015; Lim, 2020). In such conditions, moderation activism becomes a practice that demands a dual strategy: building emotional and social resilience amidst attacks, while designing creative and adaptive communication to digital logic. This situation shows the existence of interrelated structural and cultural challenges. The state, as the dominant political actor, often carries the rhetoric of moderation, but in practice allows or even nurtures intolerance for electoral interests (Mietzner, 2018). On the other hand, civil society, which should be a bastion of pluralism, is also experiencing fragmentation: some are polarized into narrow identities, others are marginalized because they are unable to compete in a discourse landscape dominated by sentiment and emotion (Fossati et al., 2020). It is in this narrow space that moderation activists try to stand, network, and create alternative spaces.

Therefore, it is important to understand how moderation activists in India and Indonesia respond to this situation. How do they formulate strategies? Where do they get support? What forms of pressure do they face? These kinds of questions are important to answer to dismantle the assumption that moderation is merely an elite discourse, and to see that behind the narrative of diversity and tolerance that is often promoted, there is a real struggle that is full of risks and complexity. By examining these dynamics in depth, we will not only understand the changing socio-political landscape, but also be able to identify points of hope: micro practices that can be developed into new social forces, interfaith solidarity that is born from below, and the creative use of digital technology to rebuild the narrative of diversity. In a global context marked by the strengthening of religious populism, understanding this struggle is not only important academically, but also strategically socially.

This research seeks to capture the pulse of the struggle of religious moderation activists amidst the great current of polarization. Through a qualitative-critical approach, this study will explore daily practices, experiences of resistance, and how they interpret and maintain the space of moderation. By comparing the Indian and Indonesian contexts, this study also opens up the possibility of cross-national reflection on how peace narratives can be kept alive even in conditions that are inhospitable to them.

## 2. METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research method. This approach was chosen to explore in depth the dynamics of burnout in religious moderation activists in the context of two different countries but with structural similarities, namely India and Indonesia. The main data sources come from academic literature, reports from civil society organizations (CSOs), national and international scientific journal articles, and media documentation discussing the issues of interfaith conflict, political polarization, and pressure on tolerance activists. The literature reviewed was selected based on the criteria of relevance to the theme, recency (maximum of the last 10 years), and source credibility. Several additional reference materials were obtained from academic platforms such as SINTA, Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, as well as reports from international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Pew Research Center.



The data were analyzed using content analysis techniques that aim to identify narrative patterns, socio-political pressures, and representations of burnout in various social and media contexts. The analysis was carried out by categorizing the data into main themes such as stigma against activists, religious disinformation, and policy responses to polarization. This study does not use survey instruments or direct interviews, because its main focus is on exploring discourse and critical reflection on the structural and psychosocial conditions surrounding religious moderation work. To maintain validity, source triangulation is used by comparing data from academic journals and media coverage across countries to obtain a complete and objective understanding.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### **Genealogy of Religious Moderation and Religious Tensions in South and Southeast Asia**

Religious moderation as a socio-political concept did not emerge suddenly, but rather developed in the context of a long history of interreligious relations, power dynamics, and responses to extremism. In the South and Southeast Asian region, religious diversity has become an integral part of people's lives. However, history also records that this diversity is often accompanied by tension. In India, tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities have roots in the British colonial era, when the politics of divide and rule were used to strengthen colonial power through religious-based identity groupings. This tension continued to linger and harden, especially after the partition of India-Pakistan in 1947, which caused collective trauma and bloody conflict between the two groups (Pandey & Gyanendra, 2001).

Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia such as Indonesia, the history of religious moderation has a somewhat different character. Indonesia is known for Pancasila as the foundation of the state, which since the beginning of independence was intended to guarantee religious freedom and harmony between religions. However, challenges continue to arise from time to time, especially when religion is brought into the arena of practical politics. The New Order strictly regulated religious expression, but the post-reformation actually opened up wide space for the emergence of religious identity in politics, which ultimately gave rise to tensions between groups and disrupted the principle of moderation. Therefore, the genealogy of religious moderation in Indonesia cannot be separated from the context of political change, the role of the state, and the dynamics of civil society that continue (Hefner, 2011).

The South and Southeast Asian regions generally show that religious moderation developed in response to two things: first, the emergence of religious extremism and sectarian violence; second, political intervention that exploits religious identity for the sake of power. In India, the Hindu nationalist government under the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) is often accused of weakening pluralism by ignoring the rights of the Muslim minority, thus exacerbating religious tensions. In contrast, moderate movements emerged from both progressive Muslim figures and secular Hindu groups who rejected the exploitation of religion in politics (Jaffrelot & Christophe, 2019). Likewise in Indonesia, the moderation movement emerged from interfaith groups, civil communities, and state institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, in response to the threat of intolerance, radicalism, and politicization of religion. Moderation in Indonesia is also increasingly strengthened by various civil society initiatives that promote narratives of diversity and tolerance through education, social media, and arts and culture (Mudzakir & Agus, 2020). (Mudzakir & Agus, 2020).

The genealogy of religious moderation in South and Southeast Asia shows an interrelated pattern: religion, politics, and civil society influence each other in determining the direction of interfaith relations. On the one hand, challenges such as radicalization, intolerance, and religious-based social exclusion force the emergence of moderation strategies as a social defense fortress. On the other hand, the success of moderation is largely determined by how the state and society are able to build a shared narrative that is inclusive, just, and contextual. Moderation is not enough as a normative jargon, but must be present as a shared practice that guarantees security, equality, and space for expression for all religious groups (An-Na'im & Abdullahi Ahmed, 2008).



## **From Legacy of Conflict to Harmony Efforts in South and Southeast Asia**

Religious moderation in South and Southeast Asia grew as a historical response to a long legacy of socio-political conflict involving religious identity. In India, Hindu-Muslim tensions have their roots in the British colonial era that divided society for the sake of power, culminating in the partition of India-Pakistan in 1947. In Indonesia, although religious diversity was made the foundation of national identity through Pancasila, its history was colored by the dynamics between the regulation of religious expression during the New Order era and the explosion of freedom that was sometimes exploited by conservative groups after the reformation. Religious moderation in both regions developed through a tug-of-war between individual freedom and the need for social cohesion (Noor & Farish A, 2003).

Despite their different contexts, India and Indonesia face similar challenges: religious extremism and the politicization of religious identity. In India, strengthening Hindu nationalism has narrowed the space for minorities, while in Indonesia, the state and civil society have sought a narrative of moderation through policies and grassroots movements. Moderation in this region is not just a spiritual attitude, but a socio-political strategy that must be actively built to address the challenges of populism, digital radicalism, and social segregation. Its success requires a cross-sector and generational commitment to upholding the values of justice and diversity (Hasan & Noorhaidi, 2019).

## **Concept and Practice of Religious Moderation in Indonesia and India**

The concept of religious moderation in Indonesia and India developed in different socio-political and religious contexts, although both face the challenges of pluralism. In Indonesia, religious moderation has been officially made a national agenda through the Ministry of Religious Affairs since 2019 as part of the response to radicalism and intolerance after the reformation. Moderation here is interpreted as a religious perspective, attitude, and behavior that prioritizes balance, tolerance, non-violence, and respect for local culture. These values are rooted in the tradition of Nusantara Islam that accommodates local wisdom, and is strengthened by the principles of Pancasila (Azra & Azyumardi, 2020). In practice, moderation in Indonesia involves state actors, religious mass organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah, and educational institutions, both in the form of training, curriculum, and mainstreaming moderate values in public spaces (Latif & Yudi, 2019).

In India, the concept of religious moderation is not explicitly defined as a state program, but is reflected in the spirit of secularism which is a constitutional pillar. India officially recognizes all religions and guarantees freedom of religion, but in practice, the implementation of secularism often faces serious challenges. When political forces that rely on the majority Hindu identity such as the BJP dominate, the position of the Muslim community and other minorities is often threatened. In this context, religious moderation is actually more widely fought for by non-state actors such as independent journalists, human rights organizations, interfaith activists, and secular intellectual figures. The practice of moderation in India is more often reactive to discriminatory acts or sectarian violence that are often facilitated by the state. such as in the case of the cancellation of Muslim citizenship rights in Assam or restrictions on worship.

Although the practice of moderation in these two countries comes from different contexts, there are overlaps in their strategies and challenges. Both Indonesia and India show that moderation cannot be separated from the underlying power relations and political structures. When state institutions side with the values of pluralism and justice, moderation is more likely to develop systemically. However, if the state actually strengthens the dominance of the majority group or politicizes religious identity, then moderation efforts tend to weaken or are only carried out by civil parties as a form of cultural resistance. This shows that moderation is not merely a matter of individual attitudes, but also about institutional support for the principles of equality and protection of vulnerable groups.

Both countries also show that religious moderation is not a static concept, but rather something that is continuously negotiated amidst social, economic, and political dynamics. In Indonesia, the biggest challenge to moderation is when religious mass organizations and political parties compete to



monopolize religious interpretations for electoral interests. In India, the challenge is when the ideology of religious nationalism is legitimized by state institutions. In this context, the struggle of religious moderation activists becomes important as an alternative force that keeps the space for dialogue, diversity, and civil rights alive (Varshney & Ashutosh, 2002). They not only build counter-narratives to extremism, but also fight for safe spaces for minorities who are threatened by the dominance of exclusive religious ideologies.

## **Two Faces of Pluralism in Indonesia and India**

Religious moderation in Indonesia has developed as a response to increasing intolerance after the reformation. Since 2019, the government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, has actively mainstreamed the Religious Moderation program, which emphasizes the values of balance, tolerance, and anti-violence. These values are based on the Nusantara Islamic tradition that accommodates local cultural diversity. This program is implemented through training, educational curriculum, and collaboration with mass organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah, as well as involving state institutions and civil society to build an inclusive public narrative.

In contrast, in India, the concept of moderation is not explicitly institutionalized by the state, even though India constitutionally adheres to the principle of secularism. The practice of pluralism there is highly dependent on the strength of civil society, given that the state often facilitates the dominance of the Hindu majority, especially under the BJP government. Activists, journalists, and interfaith organizations are at the forefront of rejecting discrimination against minorities and fighting for equal space for religious expression. The cases of Indonesia and India show that the success of moderation depends heavily on the role of the state and the strength of civil society in balancing power dynamics, as well as strengthening an inclusive national narrative in the face of exclusive identity politics. Living pluralism is not just about tolerance, but about actively protecting the rights of minority groups within the framework of equal citizenship and social justice.

## **Identity Politics and the Exploitation of Religion in Electoral Democracy**

In the context of electoral democracy, religion often becomes a strategic tool in identity politics, especially when parties or candidates feel the need to consolidate support based on primordial sentiments. In Indonesia and India, this phenomenon is very clearly seen in the post-reform and post-economic reform political processes, when democratic competition does not always result in strengthening institutions, but instead sharpens identity polarization. Religion-based identity politics becomes a populist instrument that promises quick electoral victory, even though it risks tearing apart social cohesion. In conditions like this, religion is no longer just an expression of spiritual belief, but is mobilized as a symbol of exclusivity and a tool of delegitimization against parties with different beliefs or political views.

In Indonesia, the practice of exploiting religion in electoral democracy was clearly seen in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, where religious issues were used to steer public opinion against the incumbent gubernatorial candidate who was non-Muslim. Religious narratives are framed in such a way through sermons, social media, and massive campaigns, which trigger tensions between religious communities and produce a large wave of sectarian politics. This pattern is then replicated in various elections, where religious affiliation becomes the determinant of electability, no longer capacity and policy vision. In the midst of these conditions, religious moderation is often marginalized by religious narratives that are framed in a populist manner and simplify social complexity into a dichotomy of "us" versus "them".

Meanwhile in India, the politicization of religion has reached a more structural form under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, which carries the Hindutva ideology, namely the vision of India as a Hindu nation. In various elections, religious-based political campaigns are used to strengthen the Hindu electoral base by framing Muslims as a threat to national identity. Issues such as the restoration of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple, the revocation of Article 370 in Kashmir, and the



Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have become campaign tools that divide citizens based on religion. Discrimination against minorities, which should be prevented in a democratic country, is actually legitimized in the name of majoritarianism. This shows that the exploitation of religion in democracy not only damages a healthy political process, but also erodes the principle of equality in citizenship.

In both countries, the strategy of politicizing religion cannot be separated from the crisis of trust in the political elite and the weak political education of the community. Identity politics becomes a shortcut when substantive policy discourse is considered too complicated or not emotionally marketable. Religion, because of its power in touching the deepest human identity, becomes a soft field to be mobilized as a tool of mobilization. This is where the struggle of religious moderation activists finds its relevance, namely to ensure that religion does not fall completely into the flow of political pragmatism. They strive to build critical awareness, encourage tolerance between citizens, and challenge narrow narratives that reduce religion to a mere tool of power.

### **Politicization of Religion and Dynamics of Identity Politics**

The politicization of religion in electoral democracy is often used as an effective tool to gain political support, especially in pluralistic societies such as Indonesia and India. In Indonesia, this phenomenon has emerged since the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, when religious issues were used as a political instrument to delegitimize certain candidates. Religious sentiments were exploited massively, turning democratic contestation into an arena for identity polarization. Political campaigns became filled with binary and exclusive narratives, deepening social fragmentation based on religion. The impact was felt until the national election, weakening the quality of democracy and triggering suspicion between groups.

In India, the politicization of religion is manifested in the Hindutva ideological project carried by the BJP. Under Modi's leadership, policies such as the CAA and the revocation of Kashmir's autonomy show a systematic effort to consolidate the dominance of the Hindu majority and marginalize Muslims. India's constitutionally secular democracy has begun to be displaced by religious majoritarianism legitimized through state power. Conditions in both countries show that the politicization of religion not only threatens pluralism, but also distorts the principles of democracy. In this situation, religious moderation activism becomes an important bulwark, presenting a counter-narrative and fighting for an inclusive and fair public space for all groups.

### **Hindu-Muslim Tensions and the Proliferation of Islamophobia in India**

Tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities in India are not a new phenomenon, but have escalated significantly in the last two decades, especially after the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in the country. Majoritarian politics based on the Hindutva ideology have created an atmosphere that increasingly suppresses the position of the Muslim community in the public sphere. In political rhetoric, Muslims are often portrayed as the "other" who threaten the integrity of Hindu-Indian culture. This narrative is reinforced by partisan media and right-wing civil society groups that systematically build fear of Islam, resulting in the proliferation of Islamophobia that is pervasive in the social and state structures.

One of the main indicators of the rise in Islamophobia in India is the emergence of various discriminatory policies and practices targeting the Muslim community. A striking example is the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019, which provides a pathway to citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from neighboring countries, but excludes Muslims. This policy not only ignores the principle of secularism enshrined in the Indian constitution, but also sends a symbolic signal that Muslims are not part of the government's vision of a future India. In addition, there have been numerous reports of mob violence against the Muslim community, such as lynchings on charges of carrying or consuming beef, which often go unpunished by the authorities.

Social media plays a major role in spreading Islamophobic narratives, which often include disinformation and hate speech. Digital platforms are used to spread negative stereotypes about



Muslims, such as portraying them as extremists, disease-spreaders, or demographic threats. In many cases, such posts not only go viral, but also trigger real-world violence. This proliferation of digital Islamophobia reinforces existing biases in society, accelerates the ideological radicalization of hardline Hindu groups, and weakens social ties between religious communities.

Amidst these rising tensions, moderate groups from both religions struggle to maintain spaces for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. However, this struggle is often drowned out by the overwhelming currents of identity politics and state-facilitated symbolic violence. Islamophobia in India has not only affected the security of the Muslim community, but has also undermined democracy itself, transforming it from an inclusive, participatory system into an arena of majority domination. It is in this context that understanding the historical roots of Hindu-Muslim tensions and civil society strategies of resistance becomes essential to reaffirm the importance of inclusivity, social justice, and protection of minorities in a modern democratic system

### **Hindu-Muslim Tensions in the Shadow of Hindutva**

Tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities in India have significantly intensified since the dominance of the BJP and Hindutva ideology in national politics. Hindutva emphasizes the superiority of Hindu identity and positions Muslims as an outgroup in the construction of Indian nationhood. Tensions that were previously incidental are now institutionalized in the form of discriminatory policies, such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which excludes Muslims from citizenship rights. In addition, acts of violence such as lynching of Muslims on charges of carrying beef have increased, often without a firm response from law enforcement. This phenomenon reflects a form of symbolic state violence that systematically stigmatizes minority groups.

Social media also strengthens Islamophobic sentiments by spreading hate speech and disinformation massively, accelerating social polarization. Digital platform algorithms reinforce bias and are rarely balanced by fair law enforcement. In this condition, moderate groups across faiths try to build spaces for dialogue and peace, but their struggles are often marginalized by the dominance of majoritarian narratives that are rooted in state institutions and public spaces. This escalation of Islamophobia not only threatens the safety of the Muslim community but also undermines the fundamental values of Indian democracy. In such a context, efforts at religious moderation and civil resistance become crucial strategies to maintain inclusivity and justice in a multicultural society.

### **Political Polarization and Islamic Fragmentation in Indonesia**

In the two decades after the reformation, Indonesian democracy has shown complex dynamics, where freedom of speech and political participation have increased, but also accompanied by symptoms of increasingly strong social polarization. Political polarization in Indonesia is especially evident in general elections, where electoral contestation is often framed in the narrative of religious identity. The momentum of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election was an important turning point when religious issues were used massively in political mobilization. Since then, differences in political choices have often been associated with religious affiliation or even measures of faith, dividing Muslims into factions that are ideologically and emotionally opposed to each other.

The fragmentation of Islam in Indonesia is a consequence of this polarization. Muslims who were previously relatively solid in their cultural and social expressions are now divided into several groups with different religious, political, and social orientations. On the one hand, there are moderate Islamic groups that emphasize tolerance, pluralism, and religious nationalism as advocated by large organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. On the other hand, there is also a growing number of conservative and transnational Islamic groups that are more critical of the state and tend to see democracy as a means, not an end. This difference is exacerbated by the intensity of digital communication that forms echo chambers, where each group only strengthens its own narrative and affiliation without a meeting space.



This phenomenon cannot be separated from the role of political actors who use religious identity as a tool for mobilizing and delegitimizing opponents. Electoral politics often elevates religious figures or uses religious symbols to build deep emotional loyalty in society. In many cases, the alliance between political elites and certain Islamic groups has resulted in the emergence of exclusivism in national discourse, where political opponents or different groups are positioned as enemies of religion. This practice not only harms the values of deliberative democracy, but also deepens social segregation and narrows inclusive public space.

It is in this context that the struggle for religious moderation becomes very important but also full of challenges. Efforts to rebuild a space for dialogue between Islamic groups, both moderate and conservative, as well as between Muslims and other religions, require a cross-sectoral approach involving education, media, and state policy. Without a serious strategy to curb religious identity politics, Indonesia risks losing the foundation of pluralism that has been its strength. The fragmentation of Islam due to political polarization not only weakens the social cohesion of the community, but also threatens national stability in the long term

### **Political Polarization and Internal Fragmentation of Muslims in the Era of Indonesian Democracy**

Post-reformation, Indonesian democracy has been marked by freedom of expression that has encouraged the emergence of various political views, but has also triggered sharp ideological polarization, especially among Muslims. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election was a turning point, where religious issues were used to garner political support and create moral dichotomies such as "Islam vs. anti-Islam". This polarization not only created tensions between political supporters, but also infiltrated the Muslim community itself, forming new boundaries based on different ideological affiliations and religious interpretations.

The internal fragmentation of Muslims has been further exacerbated by the role of social media, which has strengthened echo chambers and narrowed cross-group dialogue. Large organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah remain pillars of moderation, but the presence of conservative and transnational groups has widened the gap. This fragmentation has weakened the solidarity of the community in facing national challenges and hampered efforts at religious moderation. Therefore, active involvement of the state, religious figures, academics, and the media is needed to reconstruct an inclusive Islamic narrative and re-encourage the spirit of nationalism within a plural democratic framework.

### **Psychosocial Burden of Moderation Activists: Stigma, Repression, and Isolation**

Being a religious moderation activist amidst increasing extremism, political polarization, and identity conflict is not an easy role. Moderation activists are often caught in a dilemma: on the one hand, they are required to be a bridge between groups that are ideologically and theologically opposed, but on the other hand, they are often suspected, misunderstood, and even hated by their respective communities. In a polarized society, moderation is often considered a form of weak ideological compromise, or even a betrayal of the absolute truth believed in by certain groups. As a result, moderation activists face a significant psychosocial burden, which not only affects their public activities, but also their mental and social conditions in their daily lives.

One of the main forms of psychosocial burden is stigma. Activists who call for tolerance and reject religious-based hate narratives are often given negative labels such as "liberal", "anti-Islam", or "foreign puppets". On social media, they become targets of hate speech, disinformation, and even doxing. This kind of stigma has a serious impact on activists' self-esteem, sense of security, and internal motivation. Not a few of them choose to withdraw from the public space or limit their activities due to social pressure that never subsides. In some cases, this stigma even arises from the internal environment of the family, neighbors, and even fellow believers who consider the moderation approach as a deviation from the dominant norm.



Repression in the form of surveillance, legal threats, and even physical violence is also experienced by some activists, especially when they actively advocate sensitive issues such as intolerance, religious freedom, or minority rights. In some areas, the state is not always present as a protector. Sometimes state officials act ambiguously or even side with the intolerant majority group, especially when political or social pressure is strong. This creates an atmosphere of fear that makes activists feel constantly monitored and in danger. In the long term, this experience can trigger stress, trauma, and even depression that is invisible to the naked eye but erodes their psychological resilience.

Finally, social isolation is a further consequence of stigma and repression. Moderation activists often feel alienated, not only from their community, but also from strategic spaces that are increasingly filled with extreme and exclusive voices. They struggle to find enough support networks, funding, or media access to voice their ideas widely. When the public space is dominated by the binary narrative of "us vs. them," activists who try to voice a middle ground are marginalized. In this situation, psychosocial and institutional support becomes very important. Without it, the struggle of moderation activists risks becoming a fragile silent work, even though it is morally very much needed for the sustainability of a peaceful and just plural society.

### **Psychosocial Resilience Mechanisms and Resistance Strategies of Moderation Activists**

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### **The Role of Social Media and Encryption Applications in Building Polarization**

Social media has become a dominant arena in ideological and political identity battles in the 21st century. Instead of functioning as a healthy public deliberation space, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok often strengthen information bubbles (filter bubbles) and accelerate the spread of extreme discourse. Social media algorithms tend to display content that reinforces the views that users already have, thus creating an echo chamber that reinforces prejudice, strengthens hate sentiments, and eliminates the possibility of critical dialogue across views. In the context of religious tensions and political polarization such as in India and Indonesia, social media often becomes a fertile ground for disinformation and sectarian agitation.

One of the real impacts of this dynamic is the strengthening of social polarization. In India, for example, social media is used intensively by Hindu nationalist groups to spread anti-Muslim propaganda and mobilize majoritarian sentiments. Hoax videos, engineered historical narratives, and veiled hate speech are widely spread, creating a systematic image that the Muslim community is a threat to the integrity of the nation. Meanwhile in Indonesia, ahead of the electoral moment, digital platforms are often flooded with black campaigns, accusations of being infidels, and religious-based slander that tear apart social trust between citizens. The resulting polarization is not only ideological, but also emotional, and has a direct impact on life together in a pluralistic society.



In addition to open social media, encrypted messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal also play an important role in strengthening polarization, although in a more closed and difficult to track form. These applications are used to spread more radical, incendiary, or hate speech content, with higher privacy guarantees. In India, reports show that many incidents of religious-based violence were triggered by viral messages in WhatsApp groups spreading hoaxes about child kidnapping, religious defamation, or other fictitious threats. In Indonesia, similar groups are used to distribute intolerant, takfiri materials, and even symbolic jihadist calls that strengthen exclusive sentiments and hostility towards different groups.

The combination of social media algorithms and closed networks of messaging applications creates an information ecosystem that is highly susceptible to manipulation. When viral content is provocative, and when users interact more often in groups of like-minded people, the construction of truth becomes highly subjective and easily manipulated by political actors and sectarian groups. In such a situation, moderation activism faces a major challenge: they must fight the algorithmic current that accelerates extremism, face social pressure from dominant narratives, and try to build a space for dialogue amid suspicion and hatred that continues to be systematically produced. Therefore, an inclusive and ethical digital strategy is needed so that information technology does not continue to be an instrument of polarization, but can instead be transformed into a means of social recovery and reconciliation.

### **Digital Literacy Strategy and Moderation Counter-Narrative in the Era of Disinformation**

In the context of polarization reinforced by social media and encrypted applications, it is important to discuss how digital literacy and moderation counter-narratives can be a form of resistance to the flow of manipulative and extreme information. Digital literacy is not just the technical ability to use digital devices or platforms, but includes the ability to think critically about information sources, recognize bias, understand algorithms, and verify the truth of content. In a society that is vulnerable to exposure to religious hoaxes and political propaganda, increasing digital literacy is an important foundation in fortifying citizens from the negative influence of disinformation. Community-based education programs, anti-hoax curriculum in schools, and digital campaigns targeting vulnerable groups, such as young people and new internet users, are concrete forms of responding to this challenge.

Moderation counter-narratives need to be designed strategically to be able to compete with extreme discourse that has already taken root in the digital space. This approach cannot be normative or patronizing, but must be creative, contextual, and communicative using language that is relevant to the target group. Moderation activists can utilize various media formats such as memes, short videos, podcasts, and other viral content to insert values of dialogue, tolerance, and diversity. Collaboration with influencers, young religious figures, and creative content communities can expand the reach of this positive narrative. In other words, the counter-narrative strategy is not only reactive to hoaxes, but also proactive in forming a healthy digital ecosystem and supporting social cohesion in a pluralistic and complex society.

### **Grassroots Resistance and Cultural Strategies of Moderate Activists**

In the context of increasing social and political polarization triggered by tensions of religious identity, the moderation movement is not only present in the form of formal institutions or institutional campaigns, but also grows from grassroots initiatives based on local experiences and community relations. Moderate activists at the community level often carry out forms of cultural resistance that are indirect, subtle, and based on everyday values. They not only reject extreme narratives, but also build alternative spaces that emphasize diversity, mutual cooperation, and solidarity across identities. These forms often do not receive media attention or official recognition, but are highly resilient because they are tied to living social structures and collective values.



The strategies used by these moderate activists are highly contextual, utilizing cultural elements such as performing arts, local traditions, inclusive religious practices, and peaceful historical narratives as a means of deconstructing hate discourse. In Indonesia, for example, cultural approaches such as *pesantren* theater performances, *hadroh* music, or the use of visual media based on Pancasila values have been used to rekindle the spirit of tolerance and build critical thinking against hate speech circulating on social media. In India, a number of Muslim-Hindu communities in rural areas hold interfaith rituals, joint community service, or joint festivals to strengthen social cohesion, practices that basically reject the sharp dichotomy between “us” and “them”.

This resistance is not without challenges. Moderate activists are often positioned ambiguously by their own environment: too liberal for conservative groups, too religious for secular groups. They are also often the target of delegitimization, accused of being “foreign agents”, “minority defenders”, or even considered “not neutral” by the regime that actually produces the tension itself. However, it is precisely under such pressure that they develop the ability to survive through informal networks, interfaith collaboration, and the creation of counter-narratives that are not frontal but seep into social life. Their resistance is not a large-scale revolution, but rather a form of micro-resistance that penetrates the symbolic and emotional boundaries of everyday society.

By relying on real social relations, the cultural work of these moderate activists is able to build a social foundation that is more resistant to the infiltration of extreme ideologies and sectarian propaganda. This effort shows that moderation is not a weak compromise position, but a sophisticated cultural strategy in seizing discourse space from the dominance of hate narratives. Amidst the advancement of digital technology and an increasingly polarized political landscape, this grassroots initiative is actually an important key in rebuilding social trust and igniting hope for a more inclusive and peaceful future. They are the guardians of the remaining common ground in a society that continues to be eroded by division

### **Social Networks and Cultural Capital in Supporting the Moderation Movement**

The grassroots moderation movement cannot be separated from the strength of social networks and the accumulation of cultural capital possessed by activists. Cultural capital here refers to local knowledge, social skills, and community trust that has been built up from generation to generation, including through non-formal education such as Islamic boarding schools, art communities, or local traditions. Moderate activists often come from the community itself, so they have stronger social legitimacy to offer alternatives to violent or sectarian narratives. This support is not in the form of formal institutional power, but rather relational power that allows the idea of moderation to be organically accepted in people's daily lives.

The success of the moderate movement is highly dependent on the ability to build and maintain social networks that cross identities, whether in terms of religion, ethnicity, or social class. This network becomes a space for mutual learning, exchanging resources, and sharing collective resistance strategies. In many cases, the network even includes informal nodes such as farming communities, local artists, mosque youth, and even groups of mothers studying the Koran. With strong networks, moderate movements have the resilience to withstand political pressure and digital disinformation, and become a symbolic force that sows hope and social cohesion in a society plagued by fragmentation.

### **Challenges and Long-Term Prospects of Moderation Amidst Populism**

The rise of populism in the global political landscape has put great pressure on spaces for moderation, especially since populism often relies on a sharp dichotomy between “the people” versus “the elite,” or “us” versus “them.” In this condition, religious moderation is often misunderstood as an ambiguous, indecisive, or even non-partisan position. Populism that plays on identity sentiment with emotional rhetoric is easier to mobilize the masses through simple narratives and common enemies. Meanwhile, a moderate approach that prioritizes dialogue, empathy, and rational considerations feels slow amidst political currents that prioritize speed and reactivity.



Another challenge arises from how populism exploits social media and digital algorithms to build the illusion of consensus and marginalize critical voices that do not follow the majority. In this context, the discourse of moderation often loses in the information battleground because it does not rely on sensation or conflict. Moderation activists are also faced with internal fragmentation, where differences in approach between state actors, religious figures, academics, and grassroots communities are often unbridgeable. This creates the impression that moderation is a project that is not solid and easily drawn into certain political interests.

However, the long-term prospects of the moderation movement are not entirely bleak. A number of transnational initiatives, interfaith education, and strengthening digital literacy capacity among the younger generation show that the seeds of resistance to religion-based populism are beginning to grow. When society experiences conflict fatigue and begins to feel the consequences of polarization that damage the social order, the narrative of moderation can be a turning point that offers emotional stability and a more sustainable direction. The success of moderation is not measured by the speed of its impact, but by its ability to instill the values of diversity as part of a collective identity.

For this reason, the long-term strategy that needs to be built is to make moderation not a defensive discourse, but rather a proactive framework for political and cultural action. Moderation must be present in the education curriculum, popular media, art, and public policy governance, not just in the moral statements of political elites or religious figures. This requires consistency, patience, and courage to confront the often destructive majoritarian narrative. In an era of populism that blurs the lines between fact and emotion, moderation must emerge not as a soft middle voice, but as a quiet but resilient moral force.

### **Public Literacy and Critical Education as Pillars of Future Moderation**

One of the key elements to ensure the sustainability of the moderation movement amidst the wave of populism is serious investment in public literacy and critical education, especially among the younger generation. Populism tends to thrive in a society with minimal reflective thinking skills and easily provoked by emotional narratives without verification. In this context, education that is only oriented towards memorization and obedience is not enough to equip citizens to face the complexity of digital information and ideological pressures. Therefore, a long-term strategy oriented towards moderation must be rooted in an education system that encourages empathy, reason, and the courage to openly dialogue across differences.

Digital literacy, media literacy, and participatory civic education are inseparable parts of this moderation project. Moderation activists and policymakers need to collaborate to integrate the values of pluralism and openness into school curricula, teacher training, and digital content that is widely accessed by the public. Outside the formal system, community-based campaigns, art, and visual narratives must also be utilized as inclusive awareness-raising media. In this way, moderation is not only present as an elite discourse or political campaign slogan, but is transformed into a social life force that is deeply rooted in critical awareness and cross-identity solidarity.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The struggle of religious moderation activists amidst Hindu-Muslim tensions and political polarization in India and Indonesia is a complex effort that is not only ideological, but also highly cultural, strategic, and contextual. Polarization exacerbated by social media, digital algorithms, and identity populism has created a fragmented social landscape that is vulnerable to hate manipulation. However, in the midst of these conditions, various forms of grassroots resistance and cultural strategies have emerged that are carried out by moderate activists quietly but effectively, especially through peaceful narratives, art, and interfaith social relations. Although challenges come from internal fragmentation of the movement, pressure from populism, and minimal institutional support, the prospects for moderation remain open as long as it can build a critical literacy base, expand cross-



sectoral work, and transform into a social movement that lives in the daily lives of society. Therefore, moderation is not a weak form of compromise, but rather a strong moral-political strategy in maintaining social cohesion and fighting for diversity as the foundation of an inclusive future.

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