

Religious Moderation in Indonesia: Navigating Conflict and Pluralism through Agonistic Democracy

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Abstract

Indonesia's religious diversity presents significant challenges, particularly in managing public expressions of religious identity and achieving equality in diversity. To address these issues, the government introduced a religious moderation policy in 2019, which aims to foster tolerance and manage the relationship between religion and the state. This policy, formalized through Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023, aims to create a tolerant society that values diversity. However, the policy has faced criticism for emphasizing harmony over religious freedom and potentially favoring the majority religion, thus risking repressive pluralism and government control over religious practices. This study critically analyzes the religious moderation policy using the perspective of agonistic pluralism, which emphasizes the importance of conflict and diversity in democratic life. Using qualitative methods and Ernesto Laclau's critical discourse analysis, this study explores the policy's ability to redirect conflict constructively and prevent hegemonic domination. The findings show that while the policy aims to harmonize religious diversity, it risks undermining pluralism by imposing a state-supported version of religious practice, potentially sidelining minority religions and indigenous faiths. The conclusion is that the government's approach to articulating a discourse of moderation has the potential to create a kind of harmony that appears on the surface but is not authentic. By integrating values such as tolerance and anti-extremism into the dominant narrative, the government seeks to homogenize religious practice and eliminate legitimate diversity of views, which can ultimately curb the dynamics of healthy pluralism and create a false harmony that benefits certain power agendas.

Keywords

Religious Moderation Policy, Agonistic Pluralism, Democratic Plurality,

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country rich in diversity, particularly in the context of religion. This religious diversity is not only seen from a demographic perspective but also includes variations in religious interpretations, interests, and aspirations within society. The dynamics of religious diversity in Indonesia pose significant challenges in social and political life, necessitating comprehensive policy approaches to ensure social cohesion and political stability. According to the Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies at Universitas Gadjah Mada (CRCS UGM), there are two main issues in



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managing religious diversity in Indonesia: the rise of religious identities in public spaces post-reform and the challenges of creating equality in diversity (Bagir et al., 2011).

After the 1998 Reformasi, Indonesia experienced an unprecedented increase in freedom of expression and ideological pluralism. This period marked the end of the New Order's strict ideological control and opened up space for various social-political views and movements, including those based on religion. However, the newfound freedom also brought new challenges, such as the emergence of communal conflicts based on religion in Maluku, North Maluku, and Poso (Bagir, 2022), and an increase in violations of religious freedom and belief. Data from the Wahid Foundation shows that between 2009-2018, there were 1,420 cases of violations of religious freedom by non-state actors, with a trend of increasing intimidation and non-physical violence, even though physical violence decreased (Wahid, 2020).

This context makes the policy of religious moderation introduced by the government an important response to managing religious diversity in Indonesia. Religious moderation was first initiated by Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin in 2019 and was officially integrated into state policy through Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023 concerning the Strengthening of Religious Moderation. This policy aims to promote tolerance, reduce religious extremism, and prevent religion-based violence through a more inclusive approach that respects diversity (Saifuddin, 2019). This guideline is implemented not only by the Ministry of Religious Affairs but also by local governments and various other ministries/agencies, with budget support from both the national and regional budgets (APBN and APBD).

However, although the policy of religious moderation seems like a positive effort to manage religious diversity and promote social harmony, there are various criticisms regarding its implementation. Criticisms come from various groups, including academics, civil society organizations, and religious communities. The Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) and the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) in their research "Politics of Moderation and Religious Freedom: A Critical Review" highlight that religious moderation can become a tool to curtail religious freedom and belief, as it potentially sidelines minority groups considered inconsistent with the state's definition of "moderate" (ICRS and PGI, 2022).

Other criticisms come from moderate and conservative Islamic circles. Prof. Ma'mun Murod Al-Barbasy from Muhammadiyah University Jakarta, for example, criticizes that the concept of religious moderation is often applied inconsistently and can reinforce the dominance of majority groups over other religious minorities, which contradicts the true aim of moderation (Al-Barbasy, 2022). Meanwhile, fundamentalist groups like Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), through former spokesman Ismail Yusanto, also oppose this concept, arguing that religious moderation is used to eliminate Islamic teachings considered not in line with national or moderate values (Prasetyo, 2020). Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia is a religious-based social organization that was disbanded by the Government during President Jokowi's administration. Naturally, opposition sentiment toward every government policy becomes quite common.

These criticisms suggest that the policy of religious moderation might function more as a political tool to control religious expression and reinforce the hegemony of certain groups. The concept of governing religion proposed by Bader (2009) illustrates how the state can regulate religion through both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms, which can serve to maintain political stability but at the same time sacrifice religious freedom. The policy of religious moderation in Indonesia tends to take a

hierarchical approach, which has the potential to violate the principles of pluralism and religious freedom constitutionally recognized.

To evaluate this policy more deeply, this study uses the theoretical framework of agonistic pluralism developed by Chantal Mouffe. Agonistic pluralism emphasizes the importance of recognizing and managing conflicts in society as part of a healthy democratic process. In this view, differences do not have to be eliminated but accommodated within a political structure that allows various groups to participate and express their identities openly (Mouffe, 2013). Agonistic pluralism differs from the deliberative model that prioritizes rational consensus, as it emphasizes the existence of differences and unavoidable conflicts in a pluralistic society. The 'agonistic' approach acknowledges the reality of its boundaries and the forms of exclusion they produce, rather than attempting to obscure them with rationality or morality. This approach is more attuned to the diversity of voices within contemporary pluralist societies and the complexity of their power structures. The struggle will not occur between 'enemies,' but rather between 'adversaries,' as all participants recognize each other's positions as legitimate within the contest. This understanding of democratic politics, which Mouffe refers to as 'agonistic pluralism,' cannot be conceived within a rationalist framework that inherently tends to erase diversity. (Mouffe, 2000).

In the context of religious moderation policies, an agonistic pluralism approach can provide a more critical view of the extent to which this policy is truly inclusive or leads to the domination of certain groups. Through this framework, this study aims to evaluate whether the religious moderation policy can guide conflicts into constructive and democratic paths or merely reinforce the status quo and monopoly of power. This study offers novelty in several aspects. First, this is one of the first studies to use the perspective of agonistic pluralism to evaluate religious moderation policies in Indonesia. This perspective offers a different analysis from previous studies that focused more on legal aspects, tolerance, or religious freedom. By using agonistic pluralism, this study explores how conflicts and differences can be managed in religious moderation policies without eliminating diversity or limiting the freedom of certain groups.

Second, this study examines the potential of religious moderation policies to become a tool of political hegemony that can suppress certain religious expressions deemed inconsistent with the "moderate" definition set by the government. This is different from previous studies that tend to see religious moderation as a positive effort to promote harmony and prevent radicalism. This study, on the contrary, highlights how this policy can be used to maintain political control and steer religious discourse in a direction favorable to those in power.

Third, this study focuses on the implications of religious moderation policies on the political and social dynamics in Indonesia, considering how this policy affects the relationship between majority and minority religious groups and the potential to trigger or quell conflict. Thus, this study provides deeper insights into the role of religious moderation policies in the context of political and social pluralism in Indonesia.

In the context of religious diversity in Indonesia, religious moderation policies are essential tools for managing diversity and promoting tolerance. However, their implementation raises various criticisms and challenges, especially concerning the potential of these policies to be used as political tools and constraints against certain groups. By using the theoretical framework of agonistic pluralism, this study seeks to provide a critical analysis of religious moderation policies, evaluate their impact on pluralism and religious freedom, and offer recommendations to improve these policies to be more inclusive and fair.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method with a critical discourse analysis approach based on the theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to explore a deep understanding of complex social phenomena. The paradigm used is the critical paradigm, which focuses on uncovering injustices within social structures and transforming realities dominated by the hegemony of power (Norman, 2018). The research aims to provide a critical analysis of religious moderation policies through the perspective of agonistic pluralism and evaluate their impact on plurality and religious freedom. This approach views policies as discourses that have the potential to create or dislocate hegemony within a social context. The selection of informants is a crucial step in qualitative research, as it directly impacts the quality and relevance of the data collected. This study employs purposive sampling to identify two categories of informants: policy makers and policy targets. Policy makers include individuals involved in drafting or implementing religious moderation policies, offering valuable insights into their purpose and context. Meanwhile, policy targets are those affected by or critically engaged with these policies, providing perspectives on their impact and relevance. Guided by the framework of agonistic pluralism, this approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of religious moderation policies from both textual and contextual dimensions.

Informants were selected purposively, including those involved in the formulation of religious moderation policies, such as policymakers and implementers, as well as those who are subjects or affected by these policies, such as religious communities and policy observers. Examples of sources include representatives from PBNU, Muhammadiyah, academics from UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, researchers from PUSAD Paramadina, and members of the Setara Institute. This selection aims to obtain a comprehensive perspective on religious moderation policies from various viewpoints. The selection of informants focuses on individuals with the most relevant knowledge or significant roles in social settings, facilitating the exploration of the research topic (Abdussamad, 2021). This study uses purposive sampling to identify two categories of informants for investigating religious moderation issues. The first category includes those involved in formulating or implementing religious moderation policies. These informants provide insights into the text and context of the policies, offering perspectives that deepen the analysis of the discourse through the lens of agonistic pluralism. The second category consists of individuals affected by or critically observing the policies. These informants, though not directly involved in policy formulation, contribute valuable perspectives on its impact and the broader management of religious diversity. Together, these categories ensure a comprehensive understanding of religious moderation policies.

Data were collected through document studies (policy documents, mass media, academic publications) and in-depth interviews with relevant informants to gain a comprehensive understanding of the discourse surrounding religious moderation policies and how this discourse is constructed and maintained.

The data analysis techniques involve several stages: first, preliminary reading to obtain a general understanding of the data. Second, identifying nodal points and floating signifiers through a coding process to understand the key elements in the policy discourse. Third, relational analysis to identify relationships between discourse elements and how identities and antagonisms are formed. Fourth, analyzing hegemony and hegemonic interventions to assess how policies attempt to create or dislocate hegemony. Fifth, evaluation based on the perspective of agonistic pluralism to assess the extent to which policies support or hinder religious plurality and justice. The final stage is drawing conclusions from the analysis results to understand the dynamics of power and diversity within religious

moderation policies. Data validity is tested using source, method, and data triangulation techniques. This triangulation ensures the accuracy of the data by verifying information from various sources and methods of data collection.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Reflection and Projection: From the Yogyakarta Symposium to the National Policy Conception

This section explores the origins and essence of the construction of religious moderation in Indonesia. The researcher focuses on how the concept of religious moderation was first developed and then formulated into formal state policy to address challenges in the religious context. The main focus of this section is the history of the emergence of the idea of religious moderation and the process of forming the concepts that shape this idea. This exploration is crucial to understanding how this idea was created and how religious moderation may undergo a shift in concept in response to evolving social and political dynamics in Indonesia.

The origin of the idea of religious moderation in Indonesia can be traced back to the Symposium on the Reactualization of the Relationship between Religion and Culture, organized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs on November 2-3, 2018, in Yogyakarta. This event was attended by several religious and cultural figures, including Abdullah Muhaimin, Acep Zamzam Noor, Alissa Wahid, and others. The symposium was held in response to the increasing influence of foreign cultures and transnational ideologies, which often disregard or even oppose the integration of religion and culture in Indonesia (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2018b). During the symposium, participants discussed the importance of maintaining harmonious relations between religion and culture as part of the national identity.

The outcome of the symposium was the "Yogyakarta Consensus of Religious and Cultural Figures," declared and signed by the attending religious and cultural leaders. This declaration emphasized the need for adaptation and change in facing contemporary challenges, such as social and cultural disruptions, and the integration of religious practices with ethnic cultural traditions. The consensus also highlighted the expansion of education that values tradition while remaining responsive to changing times, with a particular emphasis on the role of parents as primary educators and moral education as a priority. Additionally, it underscored the proactive role of the state in facilitating and initiating social and cultural changes to create a common narrative for national progress. The involvement of all parties, including religious institutions, cultural communities, and the government, was strongly emphasized, with the hope that religious practices would lead to spiritual and social piety that positively impacts society (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2018c).

However, the consensus was not the sole basis for the emergence of the idea of religious moderation. According to the researcher's interview with a representative from the Ministry of Religious Affairs on April 23, 2024, Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin (2014-2019) felt that the symposium had not adequately addressed the comprehensive issues concerning religious problems in Indonesia. The event was seen as not having thoroughly discussed the major religious issues in Indonesia and not involving representatives reflecting the entire spectrum of religious communities' interests in Indonesia (Interview, 2024).

As a follow-up, Lukman Hakim Saifuddin initiated an Interfaith Dialogue on December 12, 2018, in Jakarta, which brought together various religious and cultural figures, including leaders from all religious assemblies and the millennial generation. The forum was attended by theologians, philosophers, academics, and politicians such as Romo Magnis, Mahfud MD, and Komarudin

Hidayat, as well as high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This discussion revealed the concern of religious leaders about the escalating social conflicts and the emergence of factions within religious life that threaten national integration (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2018a).

The dialogue was themed "Religious Life in Indonesia: Reflection and Projection," focusing on conservatism, the relationship between religion and state, and religious dynamics in the era of disruption. The outcome of this discussion was then formulated into the "Jakarta Charter," which included five key points. The charter emphasized that religious conservatism is not problematic if understood as an effort to preserve religious teachings and traditions, but it could become a serious threat when it turns into exclusivism and extremism used for political purposes. The charter also noted that conservatism leading to exclusivism and extremism is often triggered by non-religious factors such as political and economic injustice, legal formalism, religious politicization, and cultural practices (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2018a).

Strategies for Addressing Religious Challenges in the Jakarta Charter

The Jakarta Charter formulated several strategies to address religious challenges in Indonesia, including:

- **Strengthening Moderate Religiousness:** Returning religion to its role as a spiritual and moral guide by leading a movement to strengthen moderate religiousness and providing guidance so that religion does not focus solely on ritualistic and formal aspects.
- **Regulation and Policy Reform:** Eliminating or restricting regulations that encourage exclusivism and extremism, including revising Law No. 5 of 1969 in accordance with the Constitutional Court's Decision, to prevent the emergence of discrimination in religion.
- **Development of Communication and Cultural Strategies:** Facing the era of disruption by developing a national communication strategy and translating religious material into content easily understood by the younger generation to strengthen collective common sense.
- **Facilitation of Interfaith Dialogue:** Strengthening inclusive values and tolerance by facilitating interfaith dialogue focused on the younger generation to reinforce inclusive values.
- **Guidance by Religious Leaders:** Guiding the community in practicing open religion and using religion as a source of creation and inspiration for life, so that religion can be practiced with its essential values of peace and respect for differences.

Based on the results of the interfaith dialogue and the formulations in the Jakarta Charter, Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Hakim Saifuddin determined that this vision would become the foundation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs' main program in the 2019 fiscal year. At the 2019 National Working Meeting of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, themed "Moderation for Community Cohesion: Interpreting the 2019 National Working Meeting of the Ministry of Religious Affairs," Lukman introduced three main principles: religious moderation, community cohesion, and data integration. Emphasis was placed on the idea that religious moderation should be the core of every program of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2019, coinciding with the United Nations' designation of the "International Year of Moderation" (Saifuddin, 2019).

The Construction of Religious Moderation Discourse in State Policy

After the 2019 National Working Meeting, the Ministry of Religious Affairs formed a working group to develop the concept of religious moderation through various workshops, focus group discussions (FGDs), and other activities. The result of these initiatives was the publication of the

"Religious Moderation Book," which became the reference for implementing this program, and the "2020-2024 Religious Moderation Roadmap," which integrated this idea into the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2020-2024. This book clarifies the definition and application of religious moderation as a guide to addressing various social and religious issues, including radicalism and extremism (Saifuddin, 2019; Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2020).

The "2020-2024 Religious Moderation Roadmap" clarifies the policy direction for strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia. This document outlines strategies for integrating religious moderation into various sectors, such as education, media, public services, and government policies, with the goal of building a peaceful and tolerant society. From the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe (1984), the Ministry of Religious Affairs uses the concept of an equivalence chain to link various elements and create a new hegemony through religious moderation. This is an effort to articulate various discursive elements (such as religion, culture, and politics) into a collective identity that supports pluralism and inclusivity, and to build social consensus on the importance of religious moderation in national and state life.

The Yogyakarta Symposium and the Jakarta Charter became important points where religion and religious policy were discussed in the contemporary context of Indonesia. These two forums not only introduced religious moderation as a response to local challenges but also as a response to the influence of transnational ideologies that could threaten Indonesia's unity and diversity. Through these various initiatives, religious moderation is positioned as a solution to address challenges such as radicalism, exclusivism, and increasing social disintegration (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2018b; Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2018a).

The formation of the idea of religious moderation and its construction in state policy demonstrates the systematic efforts of the Ministry of Religious Affairs to create an inclusive and responsive hegemonic discourse to the socio-political dynamics in Indonesia. By integrating religious moderation into formal policy and national programs, the Ministry aims to build a strong national identity through social harmony and pluralism. This effort is expected to address challenges such as extremism and exclusive conservatism that threaten social cohesion in Indonesia.

The Construction of Religious Moderation Discourse in State Policy

The discourse on religious moderation in Indonesia has been strategically developed as a state policy to address the challenges of rising extremism and to promote national harmony. This initiative, primarily driven by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag) and strongly endorsed by President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), seeks to align religious practices with the national ideology of Pancasila, which emphasizes unity in diversity and harmonious coexistence among Indonesia's diverse religious communities.

The concept of religious moderation as promoted by Kemenag is based on principles of balance and justice, aiming to find a middle ground between extreme conservatism and liberalism. This concept is deeply rooted in a theoretical framework that draws from Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse, which posits that the creation of a hegemonic discourse involves the articulation of various social elements into a cohesive narrative that becomes dominant within a society (Laclau & Mouffe, 1984). In this context, religious moderation serves as a hegemonic discourse aimed at guiding the social practices and beliefs of Indonesian society to align with the broader goals of national unity and stability.

According to Lukman Hakim Saifuddin (2019), former Minister of Religious Affairs, religious moderation requires a balanced approach to religious practice that respects one's own faith while being inclusive towards the beliefs of others. This approach is intended to prevent the polarization of society into extremes, fostering instead a culture of mutual respect and tolerance. The idea is that by promoting a moderate stance in religious practices, Indonesia can maintain social harmony and prevent conflicts that arise from radical ideologies.

The formalization of religious moderation began with the publication of the Religious Moderation Book (2019), which outlined the fundamental concepts and principles of religious moderation as a state policy. The book defines religious moderation as a balanced religious attitude that avoids both excessive conservatism and liberalism, advocating for a respectful engagement with different beliefs while maintaining one's own religious commitments (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019). This conceptual framework promotes a middle path that seeks to avoid extremes and foster a harmonious and inclusive society.

Following the publication of the book, the 2020-2024 Religious Moderation Roadmap was developed to provide a strategic framework for implementing religious moderation across various sectors of Indonesian society. The roadmap identifies four core areas of focus: the relationship between religion and politics, religion and law, religion and public services, and religion in public spaces. It provides specific strategies for integrating religious moderation into educational curricula, public service delivery, and community engagement, reflecting a comprehensive approach to embedding the principles of religious moderation into all aspects of Indonesian life (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2020). The roadmap also includes key indicators to measure the success of religious moderation efforts, such as national commitment, tolerance, rejection of violence, and accommodation of local culture. These indicators are designed to assess how well individuals and communities adhere to the principles of religious moderation, thereby fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding across different religious and cultural groups.

President Jokowi's strong endorsement of religious moderation as a state policy underscores its significance within the national agenda. During the 2020 National Coordination Meeting of the Forum for Religious Harmony, Jokowi emphasized that religious moderation aligns with the spirit of Pancasila and is crucial in combating extremism and fostering national unity (Panjaitan, 2020). This endorsement was further supported by Vice President Ma'ruf Amin, who highlighted the need for a theological basis for religious moderation to minimize religious conflicts and promote tolerance at local, national, and global levels (Hadi, 2020).

The state's commitment to religious moderation was formalized with the issuance of Presidential Regulation No. 58 of 2023 on Strengthening Religious Moderation. This regulation mandates that all government ministries and regional authorities incorporate the principles of religious moderation into their policies and programs. By institutionalizing religious moderation through this regulatory framework, the government aims to establish it as a normative standard for governance and public life, ensuring that religious practices contribute to social cohesion and national stability (Presidential Regulation No. 58, 2023).

The regulation positions religious moderation not only as a cultural value but also as a strategic tool for preventing religious conflicts and maintaining national harmony. It mandates various government bodies to implement programs that promote religious moderation, focusing on education, public communication, and community outreach. By embedding religious moderation into

the governance framework, the state aims to create a society that is resilient against extremism and capable of navigating religious diversity with respect and tolerance.

The implementation of religious moderation as a state policy involves a multi-faceted approach that spans various sectors of society. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has initiated several programs to promote religious moderation, including training programs for government officials, religious leaders, and educators, as well as public awareness campaigns aimed at fostering a culture of tolerance and inclusivity. These efforts are designed to build a supportive infrastructure for religious moderation, ensuring that the policy is effectively communicated and implemented at all levels of society.

However, the emphasis on religious moderation has also faced challenges and criticisms. One critique is that the focus on moderation could create a binary opposition between "moderate" and "non-moderate" groups, potentially leading to exclusionary practices or the suppression of legitimate religious expressions. As Bagir (2022) notes, this dichotomy could inadvertently reinforce divisions rather than promote the intended inclusivity and tolerance. Additionally, there are concerns about the perception of state interference in religious affairs, particularly regarding how religious moderation is framed and enforced.

Moreover, some scholars argue that the concept of moderation itself is inherently subjective and may be difficult to standardize across Indonesia's diverse religious landscape. The risk is that what is considered "moderate" in one context may be perceived as too conservative or too liberal in another, leading to inconsistencies in policy implementation and potential resistance from various religious communities.

The construction and promotion of religious moderation as a state policy in Indonesia represent a comprehensive effort to shape the country's religious discourse in line with national ideals of unity and harmony. Through various institutional mechanisms, including educational reforms, public service guidelines, and national regulations, the state seeks to establish religious moderation as a normative standard for both governance and public life. This approach aligns with the theoretical framework of creating a hegemonic discourse, as described by Laclau and Mouffe, which aims to integrate diverse social elements into a unified narrative that supports pluralism and inclusivity.

While the policy of religious moderation aims to foster an inclusive and tolerant society, its implementation presents several challenges, including potential polarization, state interference in religious practices, and the subjective nature of what constitutes "moderation." Moving forward, it will be crucial for the government to continuously engage with various religious communities, ensure flexibility in the application of the policy, and address any emerging concerns to maintain its effectiveness in promoting social cohesion and preventing extremism. The success of religious moderation as a state policy will depend on its ability to adapt to Indonesia's evolving social and religious dynamics, ensuring that it remains relevant and effective in fostering a peaceful, inclusive, and harmonious society.

Religious Moderation as a Hegemonic Project

This section examines how the policy of strengthening religious moderation in Indonesia can be seen as a hegemonic project pursued by the government. According to Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is a political relation achieved through the stabilization of discourse by continuous articulation (Laclau, 1984). This concept is crucial to understanding how the Indonesian government attempts to

create a dominant discourse on religious moderation through structured political and social interventions that aim to normalize this concept in public policy.

Articulation Practices: Gathering Discursive Elements

The government's initial steps to promote religious moderation involved convening various stakeholders—religious leaders, cultural figures, academics, and bureaucrats—at forums such as the Yogyakarta Sarasehan and the Jakarta Interfaith Dialogue. These gatherings were designed to integrate diverse discursive elements—such as the values of tolerance, cultural integration, and pluralism—into a coherent framework. The outcomes of these meetings, notably the Yogyakarta Consensus and the Jakarta Charter, emphasized the necessity of a balanced approach to religion that aligns with national identity and cultural values. These outcomes positioned religious moderation as a policy response to contemporary challenges such as radicalism and extremism.

These forums served as foundational steps in the government's attempt to create a hegemonic discourse by articulating different elements into a unified narrative. According to Laclau and Mouffe, articulation involves the linking of diverse discursive elements to construct a collective identity and stabilize social structures (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2012). By facilitating these dialogues, the government sought to establish religious moderation as a central component of its policy agenda, integrating religious practices with cultural and national values (Saifuddin, 2019; Kemenag, 2020).

Transforming Elements into Moments: Empty Signifiers and Nodal Points

For religious moderation to become a hegemonic discourse, the government needed to transform these initial discursive elements into stable moments. Elements, as defined by Laclau and Mouffe, are discursive components that have not yet been fully articulated into a stable structure and remain ambiguous and contested (Hutagalung, 2008). To achieve hegemony, these elements must be transformed into moments—components that have been fully integrated into a coherent discursive structure.

This transformation was facilitated by the publication of the Religious Moderation Book in 2019 by Lukman Hakim Saifuddin and the subsequent 2020-2024 Religious Moderation Roadmap. These documents served as key tools for the government to consolidate various discursive elements into a cohesive state narrative, providing a structured interpretation of religious moderation and its implementation (Saifuddin, 2019; Kemenag, 2020). The Religious Moderation Book aimed explicitly to define and stabilize the concept of religious moderation, promoting it as a policy that supports tolerance, inclusivity, and national unity. These publications exemplify how specific actions and policies were designed to reinforce the discourse and make it central to public policy.

Moreover, the government used "empty signifiers" and "nodal points" to stabilize the discourse. An empty signifier, such as "religious moderation," gains its meaning through its capacity to unify a range of discursive elements, while nodal points help fix the meaning of other signifiers within a discourse (Laclau, 1984). In this context, religious moderation acts as an empty signifier that can adapt to different interpretations—such as tolerance, balance, or inclusivity—depending on the situation. This flexibility allows the term to function as a nodal point that anchors the discourse on religious moderation within public policy (Kemenag, 2020).

Chains of Equivalence and Antagonism: Constructing Collective Identity

The government's efforts to promote religious moderation as a hegemonic project also involved creating a chain of equivalence, linking various values such as tolerance, interfaith harmony, rejection

of extremism, and support for pluralism. This chain of equivalence helps construct a collective identity that supports religious moderation, positioning it as a unified response to threats like radicalism and extremism.

By articulating these values in opposition to extremism and intolerance, the government created a clear boundary between those who support religious moderation and those who do not. This antagonism is evident in the government's efforts to consolidate narratives about religious moderation with influential religious institutions like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Islamic higher education institutions. These organizations have aligned their narratives with the government's discourse, promoting religious moderation as a central policy agenda (Cholil, 2022). The creation of this boundary reinforces the identity of the hegemonic group, using religious moderation as a tool to differentiate and marginalize opposition. Including organizations like NU in this discourse also serves to legitimize the government's policy and bolster its authority.

This process also involves the exclusion of opposing narratives, particularly those from groups resisting the government's policy, such as some fundamentalist factions. By defining a positive identity for supporters of moderation and a negative identity for opponents, the government seeks to consolidate support for its hegemonic project while marginalizing dissenting views. This strategy aims to establish a dominant narrative that aligns with national values and excludes interpretations that do not support religious moderation (Cholil, 2022).

The Indonesian government's strategy to promote religious moderation as a hegemonic project involves a systematic articulation of diverse discursive elements into a unified policy narrative. By organizing forums, publishing key documents like the Religious Moderation Book and the 2020-2024 Religious Moderation Roadmap, and creating a chain of equivalence around key values, the government seeks to establish religious moderation as a dominant discourse in public policy. This approach reflects the ongoing need to adapt and respond to contemporary social and ideological challenges to maintain the influence of this discourse.

By using specific actions, such as the publication of key documents and collaboration with influential institutions, and by framing the discourse in a way that allows for flexible interpretation, the government seeks to normalize religious moderation as a core national value. This policy serves both to stabilize national identity and to counter extremist ideologies, promoting a harmonious and inclusive society.

Dynamics of the Discursive Field in Religious Moderation: Between Consensus and Confrontation

The concept of discursive hegemony, as proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, refers to the way a specific discourse becomes dominant within a social context, shaping public understanding and influencing societal actions. In this framework, hegemony is achieved not just through coercion but through the creation of consensus among various social actors. This dominance involves the exercise of intellectual and moral leadership by certain groups or viewpoints, making their perspectives widely accepted as the "norm" or "truth" in society (Laclau, 1984). In the context of Religious Moderation in Indonesia, the concept of hegemony is relevant for understanding how this discourse has become predominant and widely accepted. The government and other key actors, such as religious organizations and educational institutions, play crucial roles in fostering this hegemony by creating a consensus on religious moderation through various practices, including public campaigns, educational programs, and dialogues with religious leaders. The aim is to construct a collective

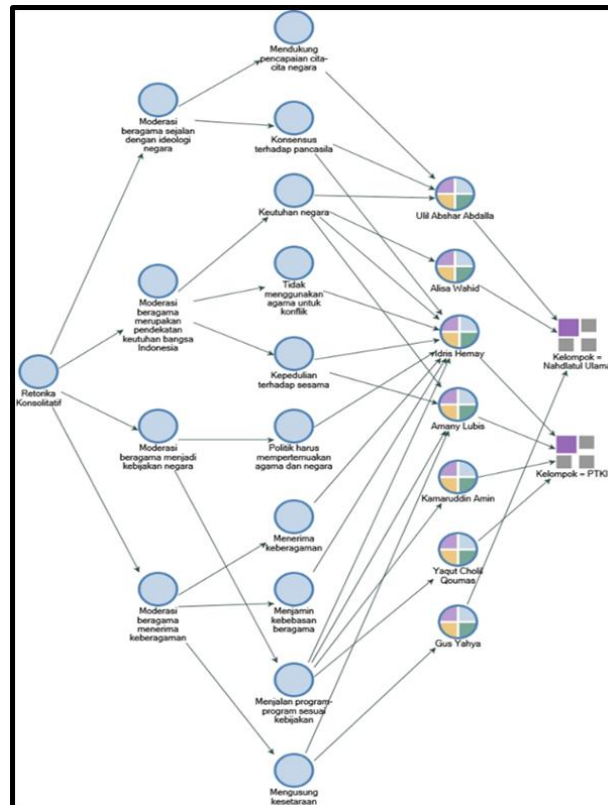
understanding of religious moderation as a response to the perceived threat of extremism and to promote social harmony.

According to Field of Discursive Theory by Laclau and Mouffe, discourses do not merely reflect reality; they actively shape it by constructing the objects and subjects they discuss. Within this discursive field, various discourses interact, negotiate, and compete to define meanings and establish social truths. This field is characterized by constant negotiation, where different groups vie for dominance and the ability to define what is considered normal or acceptable (Laclau, 1984). The field of discursive practices thus determines the discursive nature of every object, making it impossible for any particular discourse to achieve a final closure. In Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, 'closure' refers to a state where a discursive process or structure is considered complete or sealed. However, they argue that no final closure can ever be achieved in social and political discourse. Instead, identities and structures remain perpetually open to change and contestation, as society is inherently fragmented and rife with conflict. Thus, understanding the concept of 'closure' within their framework requires a deeper comprehension to avoid the misconception that they advocate for stability or permanent resolution in politics or society. For Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is a space that is always open to negotiation and transformation.

This section explores the dynamics of the discursive field surrounding religious moderation in Indonesia, which ranges from progressive to conservative interpretations. Each religious group presents different perspectives on what religious moderation means. For example, more progressive religious groups see it as an opportunity to promote interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding. In contrast, more conservative groups perceive it as a threat to their doctrinal purity and fear it may lead to the dilution of their religious beliefs. Using the NVivo 12 software, the researcher mapped out various articulations that serve as floating signifiers in the discourse on religious moderation. These signifiers were identified through data from interview transcripts, news reports, academic journals, and audiovisual podcast transcripts. The mapping revealed three distinct positions: a consolidative position supporting the policy of religious moderation, a confrontational position critiquing the policy based on concerns about its potential misuse, and a conservative position fundamentally opposing the concept based on strict adherence to religious doctrine.

Consolidative Rhetoric on Religious Moderation

Supporters of religious moderation, primarily from Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) and State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN), argue that religious moderation aligns with state ideology, supports national unity, serves as a state policy, and promotes acceptance of diversity. These actors are closely linked to the policy through political affiliations, as evidenced by the role of Ministers of Religious Affairs from PBNU and PTKIN's subordination under the Ministry of Religious Affairs.



Alignment with State Ideology: Representatives from PBNU and PTKIN frequently assert that religious moderation supports national ideals and is consistent with Pancasila, Indonesia's foundational philosophy. Ulil Abshar Abdalla, a prominent intellectual from Nahdlatul Ulama, argues that the initiative to promote religious moderation is a commendable response to the rise of extremism and violence in the name of religion that has been growing since the early 2000s. He emphasizes that religious moderation is an essential element in strengthening the cultural foundations of democracy in Indonesia, particularly by promoting religious narratives that align with democratic values (Abdalla, 2023).

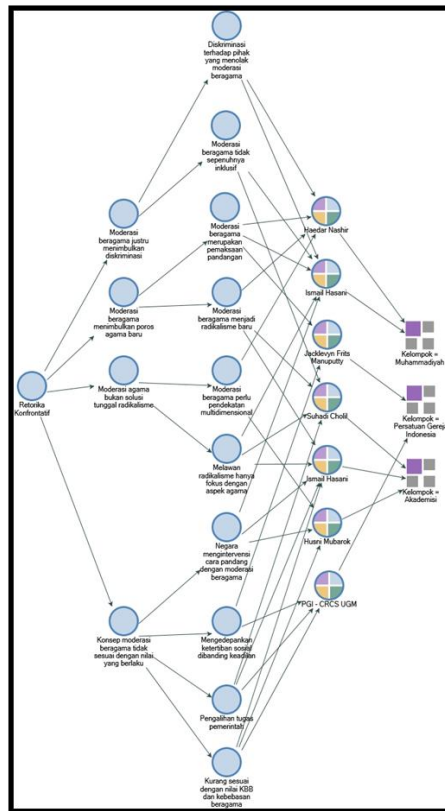
Support for National Unity: Religious moderation is also viewed as crucial for maintaining national cohesion. For instance, NU's recommendation to the government, following its 34th Congress in Lampung, called for religious moderation to be pursued as a social movement involving all societal elements to foster moderate religious practices in Indonesia (Triono, 2021). The statement by Alissa Wahid, a PBNU leader, emphasizes the need for the state to use its resources to support societal efforts in promoting moderate religious practices, reflecting a consensus-building approach (Alissa Wahid, 2021).

Religious Moderation as State Policy: As a state policy, religious moderation is seen as necessary to regulate religious practices within the boundaries of the nation. PTKIN plays a crucial role in implementing this policy by establishing Houses of Religious Moderation (Rumah Moderasi Beragama, RMB) across campuses to combat radicalism. These initiatives show how discourse is translated into concrete actions and policy implementations, reinforcing the government's commitment to promoting moderate religious practices (Rizki, 2021). By 2023, 58 RMBs were established in PTKIN campuses, demonstrating the extensive reach of this policy.

Promoting Diversity: The discourse around religious moderation also emphasizes its role in fostering diversity and acceptance of different religious traditions and practices. This aligns with the broader goal of ensuring religious freedom and preventing discrimination against unrecognized religions by the state, thereby reinforcing constitutional guarantees of religious freedom. For instance, the Ministry of Religious Affairs' guidelines highlight the importance of respecting all religious traditions as a cornerstone of national unity and social harmony (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2020).

Dynamics of Confrontation: Critiques of Religious Moderation

Despite support from some quarters, significant critiques of the religious moderation policy have emerged, particularly from groups like Muhammadiyah, PGI, and various academics. These critiques do not necessarily reject the concept of moderation but express concerns over the policy's implementation and potential negative consequences:



Potential for Discrimination: Critics argue that the policy, as currently articulated, risks creating divisions and discrimination against those deemed "non-moderate." For example, representatives from Muhammadiyah contend that being puritanical, often labeled as fundamentalist, does not automatically equate to radicalism or exclusivism. They argue that puritanical attitudes can foster spiritual discipline and moral conduct, which are positive societal forces. The dichotomy between "moderate" and "non-moderate" can unjustly marginalize groups that do not conform to the state's definition of moderation (Muhammadiyah representative, Interview, 2024).

Creation of a New Religious Axis: There are concerns that the policy could impose a specific religious interpretation, creating a new form of dominance that contradicts the principle of religious freedom. PGI representatives argue that the background of religious moderation is heavily influenced by a "fear

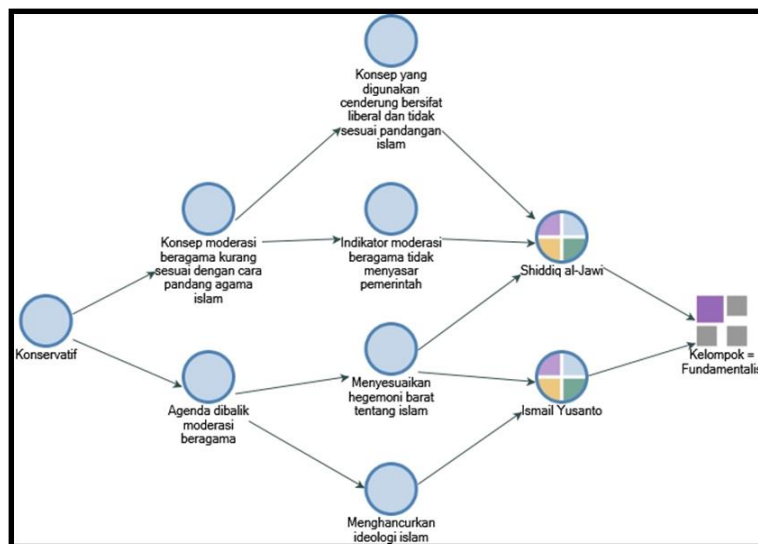
paradigm," which could lead to a form of religious authoritarianism where certain religious interpretations are privileged over others (PGI representative, Interview, 2024).

Not a Singular Solution to Radicalism: Critics also assert that religious moderation is not a comprehensive solution to radicalism, as it often overlooks the socio-economic and political factors contributing to extremism. They suggest a multidimensional approach that includes economic, social, and cultural strategies to address the root causes of radicalization more effectively (Paramadina, 2024). For instance, Muhammadiyah proposes a broader concept of "Moderation in Indonesia," which includes political, economic, cultural, and religious aspects to provide a holistic solution to radicalism (Muhammadiyah representative, Interview, 2024).

Inconsistency with Freedom of Religion: Concerns have been raised that the policy contradicts principles of religious freedom, particularly in how it enforces a state-centric view of religion. The Setara Institute highlights that equating religious moderation with national ideology creates a contradiction within a democratic regime where freedom of thought and belief should be respected. This perspective suggests that the policy could potentially infringe upon individual rights and freedoms protected under international covenants ratified by Indonesia (Setara Institute representative, Interview, 2024).

Conservative Confrontation: Fundamental Opposition

Fundamentalist groups, particularly those holding conservative Islamic views, express outright opposition to the concept of religious moderation. They argue that the policy is fundamentally at odds with Islamic teachings and suspect that it is influenced by Western agendas to undermine Islam:



Religious Moderation as a Liberal Agenda: Fundamentalist groups argue that the religious moderation policy promotes a liberal agenda that is incompatible with Islamic teachings. They criticize the use of indicators such as tolerance and anti-violence, suggesting that these are based on Western ideologies rather than Islamic principles. They also argue that the concept of religious moderation seeks to impose a secular understanding of religion that undermines the core tenets of Islam. For example, they reject the idea that all forms of violence are prohibited, citing Islamic teachings that permit violence under certain conditions, such as jihad (Conservative Islamic groups, Interview, 2024).

Western Agenda Behind Religious Moderation: These groups claim that the policy is part of a broader Western strategy to promote a version of Islam that aligns with Western political and cultural values. They cite documents such as the RAND Corporation's report "Building Moderate Muslim Networks" (2007) as evidence of a deliberate effort to shape Islamic thought in a way that supports Western geopolitical interests. They argue that the Indonesian government is pursuing this policy to gain political support from Western countries and to weaken ideological Islam in Indonesia (RAND Corporation, 2007; Conservative Islamic groups, Interview, 2024).

The analysis of the discursive field surrounding religious moderation in Indonesia reveals a complex interplay of support, critique, and opposition. Consolidative rhetoric from groups like PBNU and PTKIN frames religious moderation as a policy that aligns with national goals and promotes social harmony. Confrontational rhetoric from Muhammadiyah, PGI, and academics critiques the policy for its potential to create divisions, impose specific interpretations, and inadequately address the multifaceted nature of radicalism. Conservative groups outright oppose the policy, viewing it as a liberal imposition incompatible with Islamic principles and suspecting it of serving Western agendas. Understanding these dynamics through Laclau and Mouffe's Field of Discursive Theory provides insights into how different actors use discourse to shape public policy and social norms in Indonesia. To navigate these competing narratives, a more inclusive, dialogic approach that respects religious diversity and fosters genuine interfaith dialogue may be necessary to reconcile differences and promote a cohesive national identity. This approach would require acknowledging the legitimate concerns of all parties involved and ensuring that policies are flexible enough to adapt to the diverse religious landscape of Indonesia.

Critical Analysis through the Perspective of Agonistic Pluralism: Religious Moderation, Upholding Harmony or Sowing Hegemony?

The policy of religious moderation in Indonesia, as outlined in the Presidential Regulation on Strengthening Religious Moderation, aims to create a moderate perspective, attitude, and practice of religion. This is expected to align with the values of Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, as the national consensus governing religious and state life in Indonesia (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2023). This policy involves various actors, such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), State Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKIN), Muhammadiyah, and the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI). Each institution has a different approach to implementing and interpreting the concept of religious moderation. For example, NU and PTKIN focus on integrating moderate values into their educational curricula and religious activities (NU, 2023). On the other hand, Muhammadiyah, while not opposing the concept of religious moderation, criticizes the approach as being overly interventionist and potentially biased against a diversity of thought (Muhammadiyah, 2023). Meanwhile, PGI emphasizes the importance of applying the principle of Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) in religious moderation, while criticizing approaches they consider based on "fear" of differences (PGI, 2023). In this analysis, the perspective of agonistic pluralism proposed by Chantal Mouffe will be used to critique the policy of religious moderation in Indonesia. According to Mouffe (2013), a healthy democracy is not merely about seeking consensus but also recognizing and managing dissensus or disagreement as an integral part of the political process. Agonistic pluralism acknowledges the importance of maintaining space for productive differences and conflicts, which can strengthen democratic practices and prevent the homogenization of views that could lead to the hegemony of a particular group.

Analysis of Homogenization and Hegemony in Religious Moderation Policy

The policy of religious moderation, which aims to change perspectives, attitudes, and religious practices to be more moderate, has the potential to create homogenization of religious views in Indonesia. In the framework of agonistic pluralism, this effort at homogenization can be seen as a form of hegemony that suppresses diverse interpretations and religious practices. Mouffe (2013) argues that "a pluralist democratic system is built on the tension between consensus on ethical-political principles and dissensus over the translation of those principles." Therefore, efforts to reach a final consensus on the 'correct' or 'moderate' way of practicing religion risk reducing the space for dissent, which is actually the core of a healthy democratic life.

Data from a study by CRCS UGM (2017) show that hegemonic interpretations of Pancasila and national values have undergone various transformations according to the political context and ruling regimes. The study reveals that Pancasila, during various governmental eras, has been interpreted and used differently, whether in relation to Islam, Islamic organizations/parties, Marxism/communism, democracy, and other issues (Fachrudin, 2018). This fact highlights how a singular interpretation can potentially marginalize other perspectives that do not align with the mainstream. Thus, religious moderation, if not managed carefully, could become a tool to reinforce the hegemony of dominant groups and reduce the rich diversity of interpretations within society.

Conflict and Contestation in Religious Moderation Policy

The policy of religious moderation in Indonesia has become an arena for ideological contestation among various religious and political groups. NU and PTKIN, for example, support strengthening moderation through the integration of moderate religious values in their activities and education. Conversely, Muhammadiyah criticizes the approach as being overly interventionist, as it may ignore the plurality of religious thought in society (NU, 2023; Muhammadiyah, 2023). This criticism is based on the view that religious moderation, if implemented unilaterally by the state, could potentially restrict freedom of religion and belief and hinder productive dialogue between various religious groups.

According to Mouffe (2013), "a healthy democracy requires the recognition of differences and conflicts as essential elements." In this context, the policy of religious moderation should not only serve as a tool to suppress conflict but also as a means to facilitate agonistic dialogue that allows for various religious perspectives to be recognized and debated openly and constructively. This perspective emphasizes that public space must remain inclusive and allow for a diversity of voices to emerge and be articulated.

Groups like PGI also criticize the approach to religious moderation, which they consider based on "fear." They emphasize that the principle of Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) should be the foundation of any effort to build interfaith harmony and that enforced moderation can end up marginalizing groups considered "not moderate" (PGI, 2023). This risks creating broader social exclusion and hindering efforts toward inclusion and social cohesion.

Critique of Religious Moderation Indicators

The religious moderation indicators set by MoRA include national commitment, tolerance, anti-violence, and acceptance of tradition. While aiming to create a peaceful and harmonious religious environment, these indicators have drawn several criticisms regarding their effectiveness and impact

on religious diversity (MoRA, 2023). From the perspective of agonistic pluralism, Mouffe (2013) argues that "a pluralist democracy requires tension between consensus and dissensus to allow room for various forms of civic identification." The national commitment indicator, for example, measured by the acceptance of Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika values, potentially leads to the homogenization of religious views and practices.

This critique is also raised by PUSAD Paramadina (2023), which highlights that the application of these indicators is often colored by biases arising from the interests of dominant groups in power. For instance, in some cases, these indicators are used to assess how "moderate" an individual or group is based on a particular interpretation of nationality and religiosity, which can marginalize minority or differing views. In this context, it is essential to avoid using indicators as tools to control or limit legitimate and diverse religious expressions.

Furthermore, the tolerance indicator, marked by respect for differences and providing space for religious expression, can also be considered problematic if not accompanied by equal and free dialogue space. As Mouffe (2013) emphasizes, tolerance should not end merely in passive acknowledgment of the existence of other identities but should also include recognition that differences in identity and conflict are inevitable but necessary for the development and strengthening of democracy. Thus, the policy of religious moderation must ensure that the principle of tolerance genuinely encourages constructive and inclusive dialogue, rather than merely maintaining superficial social cohesion.

Policy Implications for Pluralism and Religious Freedom

The policy of religious moderation has significant implications for pluralism and religious freedom in Indonesia. Emphasis on adherence to the values of Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution as universal principles in religious practice potentially creates a new form of hegemony that sidelines other views considered incompatible with national norms (Fachrudin, 2018). From the perspective of agonistic pluralism, Mouffe (2013) emphasizes that "differences of opinion regarding the interpretation of ethical-political principles are essential to a healthy democratic life." Therefore, to avoid using the policy of religious moderation as a tool for social and political control that leads to the eradication of diversity, it is crucial to ensure that this policy is implemented with consideration of the diversity of views present in society and opens space for inclusive and open dialogue.

Moreover, it is important to consider how this policy of religious moderation affects minority groups and communities that have religious interpretations different from the mainstream. Research by Setara Institute (2023) shows that there is growing concern among minority groups that this policy could be used to restrict religious freedom and strengthen state control over religious practices. This reflects concerns that this policy could be used as a tool to discipline and control religious communities deemed to deviate from majority norms or state policies.

The Challenges and Opportunities of Religious Moderation

Religious moderation in Indonesia faces significant challenges in balancing social harmony and religious freedom. From the perspective of agonistic pluralism, religious moderation can be seen as an effort that potentially controls and normalizes diversity while also opening opportunities to strengthen democratic dialogue and inclusiveness. Adopting the perspective of agonistic pluralism, as suggested by Mouffe (2013), can help create a more inclusive democratic space where differences of opinion are valued and maintained as an integral part of a healthy political dynamic.

However, to achieve this, the policy of religious moderation must be implemented carefully, considering the diversity of views and interpretations present in society. This also demands policies that are more adaptive and responsive to social and political changes, as well as openness to criticism and revisions that allow diversity to flourish and contribute to a more vibrant and dynamic democratic life. Thus, religious moderation should not only serve as a tool to enforce harmony but also as a means to facilitate productive and inclusive dialogue amidst the diversity of Indonesian society.

4. CONCLUSION

Using Laclau and Mouffe's perspective, religious moderation can be seen as an instrument of power to regulate religiosity in Indonesia through articulation practices that produce hegemony. The Indonesian government has adopted this policy as a hegemonic project to create stability and social cohesion. The government integrates various discursive elements, such as tolerance, pluralism, and anti-extremism, into a coherent discourse through forums and policies like the Book of Religious Moderation and the 2020-2024 Roadmap for Religious Moderation. This process turns discursive elements into structured moments, establishing religious moderation as a stable nodal point in the discourse. As an "empty signifier," religious moderation allows for flexible meanings that can be adapted to different contexts, reinforcing discourse dominance. Strategies like creating equivalence chains and antagonism are used to achieve hegemony, forming an inclusive collective identity that excludes extremist or intolerant groups. Thus, religious moderation policy can be seen as an effort by the government to regulate religiosity in Indonesia through structured and hegemonic discourse, shaping public narratives and social views for harmony and interfaith unity.

From the perspective of Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism, the policy of religious moderation in Indonesia, intended as a state tool to regulate religious practice, risks forming a specific hegemony. It not only involves various actors and institutions with diverse views but also creates a contested space highlighting ideological conflict. This policy's state-imposed definition of 'moderation' could reduce the diversity of religious interpretations and practices, leading to homogenization against the principles of healthy democratic plurality. Rather than fostering harmony, this approach could establish new forms of political and social domination disguised in moderation rhetoric. The use of agonistic pluralism highlights the importance of accepting conflict and difference as essential components of a dynamic democracy, advocating for policies that encourage constructive conflict, ongoing interaction, and negotiation between different religious views and practices, thereby protecting existing diversity.

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