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# Local Government Communication Strategy in Resolving Religious Building Conflicts in Aceh

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| **Abstract** | Conflicts over the establishment of houses of worship in Indonesia continue to recur despite the government having established regulations such as PBM 2006 and Law No. 7/2012. This shows a gap between the legal framework and the government's communication capabilities in managing interfaith relations. This study aims to analyze the dynamics of conflicts over the establishment of houses of worship in Aceh Singkil and assess the effectiveness of government communication strategies within the framework of conflict communication theory and Islamic communication principles. The research method employs a qualitative descriptive approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with local government officials, religious leaders, and community leaders, as well as an analysis of regulatory documents. The findings show that the conflict in Aceh Singkil is administrative in nature and rooted in the mismatch between regulatory requirements and the actual needs of the community. The government's communication strategy is multidimensional, combining regulation, interfaith dialogue, and persuasive da'wah principles; however, it does not yet fully involve traditional actors who hold high social legitimacy. As a result, government communication has been effective in reducing short-term tensions but has not been able to produce long-term solutions. This study emphasizes the importance of a holistic and collaborative communication approach that involves traditional stakeholders as a sustainable strategy in religious conflict resolution. |
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| **Keywords** | communication strategy; conflict resolution; places of worship |

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a multicultural nation possessing diversity. This plurality constitutes a unique asset for the Indonesian nation, not only in terms of customs and culture but also in the religious faiths of its people. At least six officially recognised religions exist, each with the freedom to practise worship according to their beliefs. The diversity possessed by Indonesia, according to conflict theory, represents one cause of conflict due to differing interests, whether political or religious. From the perspective of Coser and Dahrendorf's conflict theory, diversity can be a source of tension if differences in interests are

not managed through effective social communication(Ritzer, 2012). Indonesia's diversity can trigger competition and friction if social actors do not have adequate mechanisms for communication and conflict resolution. The Indonesian Government, in addressing this diversity, has also produced various regulations, including guidelines for maintaining relations amongst religious communities, such as Joint Ministerial Decree (PBM) Numbers 9 and 8 of 2006 and Law No. 7 of 2012, which regulate the handling of social conflict.

In general, conflict can be understood as a condition that arises due to differences in interests, desires, or goals between individuals or groups, resulting in disrupted relationships between the parties involved(Nikmah Suryandari, 2019). Conflict is not merely a negative phenomenon, but rather a natural consequence of complex social dynamics and diverse interests.(Hadi Prabowo, 2022). Religious moderation is needed for three reasons. First, Indonesia is not a religious state, although the majority of the population is Muslim. Second, the state recognizes and guarantees the right of citizens to embrace their respective religions so that every citizen is obliged to respect and tolerate fellow believers of other faiths. Third, cases of intolerance and radicalism are still repeated at the grassroots level and are a serious challenge to be overcome together between the government and society(Eli, Widodo, & Kriswanto, 2025).In handling conflicts, the active role of the government is one of the important factors in creating favorable conditions. The active involvement of various stakeholders and the governance process is expected not only to be effective in administration but also to gain stronger legitimacy and social support from the wider community (Sumardi, 2025). The Indonesian government facilitates and accommodates the diversity religious communities. Even the country's slogan, "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" (Unity in Diversity), continues to be echoed to support national integration (Arifin, Helmi, & Nte, 2021).

However, the reality is that existing regulations in Indonesia, even those strengthened by Regional Regulations (Qanun in Aceh) in various regions, do not absolutely guarantee the prevention of social conflict. This requires research on how local governments translate regulations into functional communication strategies in the field. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that several regions have succeeded in minimising conflict through these regulations. These regulations serve as guidelines and standards that facilitate the Government in supervising, maintaining, and resolving conflicts. This confirms that the quality of communication strategies is a key variable that determines the government's success in maintaining interfaith stability. Communication capability constitutes one important factor in creating harmonisation amongst religious communities. A weak communication strategy can create opportunities for social conflict in society. This can be observed in several cases of conflict occurring in Indonesia involving religion, which frequently occur in various regions, including Aceh Singkil District, which has experienced religious social conflict several times, such as in 1979, 2001, and most recently in 2015, which remains a concern for various parties to this day. Previously, more attention was paid to the chronology of the conflict than to the government's communication strategy, leaving room for further research on the analysis of local government communication.

Aceh Singkil District is one of the districts located in Aceh Province, with the majority of the population in Aceh Singkil being Muslim at 87.49%, followed by Christian adherents at 11.26% and Catholics at 1.03%, largely originating from the Batak and Nias communities. Additionally, there are small numbers of adherents to other religions, although their numbers are not significant, with percentages for Hindu, Buddhist, and other religions at 0.22% (P. K. A. Singkil, 2024). It is acknowledged that the Muslim community in this region has lived side by side with the non-Muslim community for decades, and in daily life, inter-religious relations are involved in normal social interactions. Previously, more attention was paid to the chronology of the conflict than to the government's communication

strategy, leaving room for further research on the analysis of local government communication. The conflict in Aceh Singkil originated from the condition of places of worship in Aceh Singkil that did not yet possess official permits, triggering protests from Muslims who demanded that the government regulate places of worship (Sarkawi, 2022). However, research on how local governments develop communication strategies in dealing with this sensitive issue is still limited, making Aceh Singkil a representative case for further study.

Based on the explanation above, the author is interested in researching further the Local Government Communication Strategy in Resolving Conflicts Concerning the Establishment of Places of Worship in Aceh Singkil. The research objectives are to analyse the dynamics of conflicts regarding the establishment of places of worship in Aceh Singkil and the local government's communication strategy in its resolution process. This research also evaluates the effectiveness of implementing regulations related to the establishment of places of worship. It examines the application of Islamic communication and da'wah principles as alternative strategies in conflict resolution. In addition, this study is expected to enrich the literature on government communication and Islamic communication by assessing how the principles of da'wah and communication ethics can be used as alternative strategies in resolving religious conflicts.

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a descriptive, qualitative approach with a phenomenological perspective, aiming to understand the subjective meanings experienced by actors in the process of resolving conflicts over houses of worship in Aceh Singkil. The phenomenological approach employed refers to the interpretive phenomenological tradition, which emphasizes a deep understanding of lived experience and the interpretation of meaning constructed by informants within a social and religious context. Informants include local government officials, religious leaders, traditional leaders, affected communities, and parties directly involved in the negotiation and conflict resolution process. The number of informants was determined based on the principle of data saturation. Data collection techniques included semi-structured in-depth interviews, field observations, and reviews of official documents such as meeting minutes, local regulations, and news archives. These three techniques complemented each other through a process of triangulation of sources and methods, enhancing the credibility of the findings. The analysis was conducted following the stages of interpretive phenomenology, namely: (1) reading the transcripts repeatedly, (2) conducting open coding to find units of meaning, (3) identifying patterns and categories, (4) developing main themes that describe the informants' experiences related to government communication strategies, and (5) conducting thematic interpretations in accordance with the social context of Aceh Singkil. The aim is to obtain a deep, meaningful understanding and to be able to reveal new findings descriptively(Nasution, 2023). To ensure data validity, this study uses credibility, dependability, and confirmability strategies through triangulation techniques, audit trails, member checking, and systematic documentation of the analysis process.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to Maarif, lexically, communication can be understood as a process of sending and receiving messages conducted by humans through certain means and producing certain influences. This process can occur both when someone communicates with themselves and when interacting with others (Wazis, 2022). Wilbur Schramm states that communication is used to convey messages or information

to achieve mutual understanding. Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver define communication as the process of sending information from one point to another (Irwanti, 2023).

In terms of theme and narrative of communication, the implementation of government public communication refers to narratives and themes concerning state ideals, namely protecting the entire Indonesian territory and nation, advancing general welfare, enlightening the nation's life, and participating in creating a just and civilised world peace (Widodo Muktio, Edi Prahitio, 2023). Government communication can be understood as a form of human communication that occurs within the context of a government organisation. Therefore, government communication cannot be separated from the realm of organisational communication; indeed, it becomes an integral part thereof. The process of sending and receiving messages in government communication occurs through interdependent networks that are regulated by formal systems and binding rules governing all bureaucratic elements (Silalahi, 2004). Conceptually, communication has roots in meanings indicating a process of sharing meaning and building mutual understanding among individuals. Since its early development, the term ″*communicatio,*″ rooted in Latin ″*communis,*″ reflects the essence of communication as a means of unifying understanding through dialogue and reciprocal interaction. In a broader context, communication is understood not only as message exchange but also as a process of forming influence and meaning through various media, both personally and socially. Especially in a democratic space, every part of the state has the right to analyze and control policies (Anas, Saraswati, & Ikhsan, 2025).

In the realm of governance, communication plays a strategic role as part of organisational communication, functioning to connect various elements of bureaucracy. Government communication becomes the primary means of realising state objectives—protecting the people, advancing welfare, enlightening the nation's life, and contributing to world peace. Therefore, the success of governance implementation depends greatly on the effectiveness of communication built upon formal, systematic, and interdependent networks among government units, as well as in conflict management, whether social or religious conflicts. The term "conflict" has become so widespread that it risks losing its status as a single concept (Dean G. Pruitt and Jeffrey Z. Rubin, with Helly P. Soetjipto, 2011). Generally, conflict can be understood as a condition arising from differences in interests, desires, or objectives among individuals or groups, resulting in disrupted relations among those parties (Nikmah Suryandari, 2019). In community life, each person holds different positions and has varying feelings; these differences can generate conflicts within the community. To examine field facts concerning causes of conflict in Aceh Singkil, conflict theory, in the author's view, is appropriate for use in this research.

In Bernard Raho's book, Modern Sociological Theory, Habib Awli, Dean G. Pruitt, and Jeffrey Z. Rubin quote that conflict has positive functions, including: First, conflict is a fertile breeding ground for social change to occur. Second, conflict can facilitate the achievement of reconciliation of various interests. The conflict that arises can lead to integrative agreements that benefit both parties by providing greater benefits to each. Third, conflict can also strengthen the unity of conflicting groups(Habib, 2016). Conflict theory emerged as a reaction to structural functionalism theory, which paid insufficient attention to conflict phenomena within society(Raho, 2021). Conflict resolution can be pursued through various models, both formal and informal, and this also needs to consider the prevailing local culture and customs in a region.

**3.1 Conflict Dynamics in Aceh Singkil**

The conflict concerning places of worship in Aceh Singkil constitutes a recurring socio-religious phenomenon with long historical roots. This issue is not only related to aspects of building permits for places of worship, but also concerns demographic dynamics, regulation, and societal social perceptions. In the early period, conflict did not emerge openly because the number of places of worship remained limited and religious activities proceeded within their respective communities. However, since the increase in non-Muslim immigrants during the colonial period and after independence, the need for Christian places of worship has also increased. Many places of worship were established without official permits.

Since the 1930s, the development of plantation companies has triggered a migration of non-Muslim workers to Aceh Singkil, which then led to the establishment of religious facilities by the new community. The initiatives of local missionary figures and corporate support facilitated the growth of the local Christian community in the early decades(Naibaho, 2015). This shows how economic factors (plantations) and social networks triggered demographic changes that impacted the need for religious infrastructure, an important dynamic when examining the social legitimacy of establishing houses of worship. This event can be interpreted through three lenses that serve as references in this study: 1) demographic dynamics and labor migration; 2) regulatory vacuum and its implementation; 3) social construction/perceptions that mediate local community acceptance of new places of worship.

This condition attracted the attention of the Military Governor and Acehnese scholar Tgk. M. Daud Beureu'eh, and ultimately in 1968, he visited Lipat Kajang and Rimo, asserting in his speech that for security and to maintain Aceh's existence as a Muslim-majority region, churches should be closed, and activities halted. However, in 1979, an evangelist from the Church of God in Indonesia (GTI), North Sumatra, came to the Singkil region and established a place of worship in Rimo. This triggered anger from the surrounding community, and ultimately, the Level II Regional Government of South Aceh at that time made a policy that there would be no church establishment without the consent of the Level II Regional Government of South Aceh. Subsequently, this policy was followed up with a Joint Declaration on 13 October 1979, between Islamic religious leaders represented by 11 people and Christians represented by 11 people, witnessed and signed by the South Aceh Regional Leadership Council and the Dairi District Government (K. A. Singkil, 2023). Between 1968 and 1979, a symbolic conflict emerged, in which claims of collective identity and concerns about majority/minority status influenced public policy. Local political decisions and joint declarations served as temporary governance mechanisms to manage tensions.

Following the joint declaration, the Singkil community has lived peacefully for more than 20 years without any issues concerning places of worship. However, with the increase in the Christian population, Christians began establishing places of worship surreptitiously, ultimately becoming a problem once again. The Government then facilitated coexistence and guaranteed the rights of all communities. In 2011, the Government facilitated an agreement between both parties, producing the following consensus:

- One church unit established measuring 12x24 metres
- One undang-undang unit in Napagaluh Village, Danau Paris Sub-district
- One undang-undang unit in Suka Makmur Village, Gunung Meriah Sub-district
- One undang-undang unit in Keras Village, Suro Sub-district
- One undang-undang unit in Lae Gecih Village, Suro Sub-district

This agreement was signed on 11 October 2001, with 42 names from the Muslim community and

32 representative names from the Christian community, witnessed by elements of the Aceh Singkil District Regional Leadership Council and the Sub-district Military Commands of Simpang Kanan, Gunung Meriah, and Danau Paris (Masyarakat, 2001). The 2001 agreement demonstrates that formal mediation and local consensus can temporarily mitigate conflict, but also leaves room for sensitivity in field implementation (e.g., what constitutes "appropriate" provisions) that can trigger renewed conflict.

Several perspectives from informants interviewed by the author in Aceh Singkil regarding the dynamics of conflict surrounding the establishment of places of worship, based on various sources, including the author's research findings, are presented. These findings show that the conflict concerning places of worship in Aceh Singkil is not entirely inter-religious, but rather largely related to permit regulations. The Government asserts neutrality by adhering to PBM 2006 and Aceh Qanun No. 4 of 2016:

> *Selama sesuai dengan ketentuan, maka tidak ada halangan bagi siapapun untuk mengajukan izin rumah ibadah… pemerintah tidak mau menahan hak orang selama tidak melanggar aturan."*(Sulaiman, n.d.)
>
> "As long as it complies with provisions, there are no obstacles for anyone to apply for a place of worship permit... the government does not wish to withhold people's rights as long as they do not violate regulations." (Sulaiman, n.d.)

The Deputy Regent's explanation demonstrates that the Government remains neutral. The author also conducted interviews with the Regional Secretary of Aceh Singkil as follows:

> *Isu Konflik yang terjadi di Aceh Singkil, bukan persoalan Agama, melainkan persoalan Izin Rumah Ibadah, begitu pula jika dicermati dan ditinjau dilapangan bahwa isu konflik kerap lebih banyak dipengaruhi framing di media sosial ketimbang realitas di lapangan* (Edi Widodo, n.d.).
>
> "The conflict issue occurring in Aceh Singkil is not a religious matter but rather concerns the place of worship. Similarly, if examined and reviewed in the field, conflict issues are often more influenced by social media framing rather than field reality." (Edi Widodo, n.d.)

Meanwhile, the author also gathered information from other informants, in this case with Assistant III of the Aceh Singkil District Secretariat, Mr Asmardin, as follows:

> *Kurangnya pemahaman terhadap Regulasi dapat menibulkan persoalan, apalagi Isu rumah Ibadah ini sensitif, perlu ditegaskan dan dipahami bahwa regulasi menjadi instrumen penting agar semua pihak dapat menerima keputusan secara adil.*
>
> "Lack of understanding regarding regulations can cause problems, especially as the issue of places of worship is sensitive. It needs to be emphasised and understood that regulations become important instruments so that all parties can accept decisions fairly."

Besides direct interviews with the Deputy Regent, Regional Secretary, and Assistant III, the author also conducted information searches with the National Unity and Politics Agency (Kesbangpol), which has been instrumental in conflict resolution in Aceh Singkil, as evidenced by the following interview results:

> *Persoalan rumah ibadah di Aceh Singkil sudah berlangsung lama, bahkan sejak sebelum tahun 1979 hingga sekarang. Beberapa kali sudah ada upaya penyelesaian, seperti pada tahun 1979 dan 2001. Kesbangpol selalu melakukan monitoring terhadap perkembangan situasi, terutama ketika ada informasi tentang potensi terjadinya konflik, dan ini murni persoalan Regulasi yang menjadi Tantangan tersendiri* (Mardhiah, n.d.)
>
> "The issue of places of worship in Aceh Singkil has been ongoing for a long time, even before 1979 until now. There have been several resolution attempts, such as in 1979 and 2001. Kesbangpol always conducts monitoring of situational developments, especially

when there is information about potential conflict, and this is purely a regulatory issue that presents its own challenge." (Mardhiah, n.d.)

The largest conflict was recorded on 13 October 2015, when Christian places of worship were burned in Aceh Singkil. Long-suppressed tensions concerning the legality of places of worship triggered the incident. In that incident, masses burned at least one church, and 10 other places of worship were closed by the local government following a joint agreement amongst religious communities to reduce the number of unlicensed places of worship.

## 3.2 Government Communication Strategy in Conflict Resolution

The conflict resolution strategy for places of worship implemented by the Aceh Singkil local government primarily relies on formal regulatory frameworks, including the 2006 Joint Decree of two ministers, Law No. 7 of 2012 on Social Conflict Management, and Aceh Qanun concerning public order and inter-religious harmony. However, in its implementation, the strategy adapts to local socio-cultural conditions, which are often replete with religious sensitivities. Although these strategies appear comprehensive, data show that regulatory and dialogical approaches do not function equally. Regulation is often used as a legal basis, but socio-cultural negotiations are more frequently the primary arena for interaction among actors. This indicates tension between top-down (regulatory) and bottom-up approaches. Although these strategies appear comprehensive, data show that regulatory and dialogical approaches do not function equally. Regulation is often used as a legal basis, but socio-cultural negotiations are more frequently the primary arena for actor interaction. This indicates tension between top-down (regulatory) and bottom-up approaches.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs' strategy in resolving conflicts concerning the establishment of places of worship in Aceh Singkil is pursued through three approaches: regulative, communicative, and facilitative. Regulationally, the Ministry of Religious Affairs emphasizes the importance of making PBM Nos. 9 and 8 of 2006 the primary guidelines, in synergy with Aceh Qanun, so that both complement each other. In communication aspects, the Ministry of Religious Affairs prioritises consultation and calm dialogue based on the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil-'alamin*, calling with wisdom, good advice, and polite dialogue. The facilitative approach is implemented through strengthening the Inter-Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), promoting interfaith dialogue, and conducting workshops to channel community aspirations and prevent conflict at an early stage. Additionally, the Ministry of Religious Affairs also serves as a mediator in mediation forums to seek middle-ground solutions that accommodate minority worship needs without violating applicable provisions (Hendra Sudirman, n.d.).

> *Upaya resolusi konflik rumah ibadah di Aceh Singkil dilakukan melalui deteksi dini, koordinasi lintas lembaga, komunikasi persuasif, serta pendekatan regulatif dan kearifan lokal. Deteksi dini dilakukan dengan monitoring rutin, klarifikasi informasi, dan penurunan tim lapangan untuk mencegah eskalasi. Koordinasi dijalin bersama Bupati, Kemenag, FKUB, Satpol PP, aparat keamanan, dan tokoh agama, yang menghasilkan Komitmen Perdamaian 2019 sebagai bentuk stabilisasi daerah. Dari sisi komunikasi, Kesbangpol menerapkan dialog dua arah, menampung aspirasi, dan meredam isu media. Pendekatan adat dan persaudaraan ditempuh dengan kompromi jumlah rumah ibadah di luar regulasi sebagai wujud toleransi, meski sulit diterima pihak minoritas. PBM 2006 dan Qanun Aceh No. 4 Tahun 2016 tetap dijadikan dasar hukum. Tantangan utama mencakup tuntutan melebihi regulasi dan citra negatif media, sehingga Kesbangpol menegaskan strategi komunikasi Islam yang menekankan kedamaian, keadilan, dan persaudaraan dalam koridor*

*hukum (Mardhiah, n.d.).*

"Efforts to resolve place of worship conflicts in Aceh Singkil are undertaken through early detection, cross-institutional coordination, persuasive communication, and regulative and local wisdom approaches. Early detection is achieved through routine monitoring, clarification of information, and deployment of the field team to prevent escalation. Coordination is established with the Regent, Ministry of Religious Affairs, FKUB, Civil Service Police Unit, security apparatus, and religious leaders, resulting in the 2019 Peace Commitment as a form of regional stabilization. In terms of communication, Kesbangpol implements two-way dialogue, accommodates aspirations, and dampens media issues. Customary and kinship approaches are often undertaken through compromise on the number of places of worship outside regulations, as a manifestation of tolerance. However, this can be difficult for minorities to accept. PBM 2006 and Aceh Qanun No. 4 of 2016 remain the legal basis. Main challenges include demands exceeding regulations and a negative media image; thus, Kesbangpol emphasizes an Islamic communication strategy, focusing on peace, justice, and brotherhood within the framework of the law.(Mardhiah, n.d.)

However, the effectiveness of the Ministry of Religious Affairs' measures has not been analyzed evenly. Interviews indicate that FKUB primarily serves as a symbolic communication forum rather than a substantive resolution mechanism. This aligns with conflict communication theory, which suggests that formal forums often fail if they lack the authority to make decisions. From a phenomenological perspective, the experiences of the actors show that the Ministry of Religious Affairs' mediation is perceived as "procedural but not solution-oriented." This subjective meaning shows that formal authority is not always accepted as social legitimacy, so that government communication does not build a sense of full involvement for either Christian or Muslim groups. must be admitted. Cultural sensitivity, on the other hand, emphasizes respectful and empathetic responses to these differences. It requires individuals to approach interactions without judgment and with an intent to adapt and collaborate effectively (E-issn, Farid, Hakimi, & Natal, 2025).

The Aceh Singkil Kesbangpol explanation aligns with the Regional Secretary's view, emphasizing that the local government's strategy for resolving conflicts over the establishment of places of worship focuses on strengthening FKUB's role as a mediation and interfaith dialogue forum. The Government routinely involves the Islamic Sharia Office, Civil Service Police Unit, and Kesbangpol in control and monitoring to prevent friction. A communication strategy is pursued through participatory consultation, ensuring that community aspirations do not escalate into open conflict. The Government also actively conducts regulatory socialisation, such as PBM 2006 and Aceh Qanun No. 4 of 2016, as legal guidelines for the place of worship (Edi Widodo, n.d.).

Meanwhile, the Deputy Regent explains that conflict resolution is undertaken through regulations, interfaith mediation, and public communication based on harmony:

*"Pemerintah mengedepankan koordinasi, sosialisasi, dan peran FKUB serta MPU dalam memberi pemahaman kepada masyarakat. Upaya ini diperkuat dengan program "Desa Kerukunan" sebagai strategi jangka panjang untuk menumbuhkan toleransi dan mencegah konflik keagamaan" (Sulaiman, n.d.)*

"The Government prioritises coordination, socialisation, and the role of FKUB and the Ulama Consultative Council (MPU) in providing understanding to the community. These

efforts are strengthened through the 'Harmony Village' programme as a long-term strategy to foster tolerance and prevent religious conflict." (Sulaiman, n.d.)

The explanation above represents a regulatory approach; however, the author wishes to examine the customary perspective from the Chair of the Aceh Singkil Customary Council, recognised as possessing unique strength in resolving social conflicts amongst the community. According to information from the Aceh Customary Council (MAA) in Aceh Singkil, the customary institution has not been directly involved in the conflict resolution team for conflicts related to places of worship. However, from a cultural and regulatory approach perspective, MAA possesses great potential because it understands the language, customs, and social structure of the Singkil tribes. MAA assesses that customary and inter-clan kinship channels—such as Pohan, Brutu, Manik, and Bancin—can become effective means of building cross-religious communication, as many Muslims and Christians share family ties. According to them, when customary channels and community figures serve as mediators, communities are more likely to accept a resolution due to social respect and closeness. Unfortunately, thus far, MAA has only been invited to meeting forums, rather than being active members of the mediation team. Nevertheless, local wisdom and customary roles are deemed capable of accelerating peace achievement and strengthening social cohesion in a plural society (Pohan, n.d.)

The Local Government of Aceh Singkil is viewed as having undertaken various stages of conflict resolution in place of worship conflicts through socio-cultural approaches, dialogue, and the formation of a Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation Team involving various parties, to provide effective solutions. Implementation of socio-cultural and familial approaches was conducted as evidenced by the author's interview with Mrs Mardhiah, SH, Head of Conflict Management and National Vigilance Division, Kesbangpol, as follows:

*" Menyikapi persoalan Regulasi Pendirian Rumah Ibadah yang ada di Aceh Singkil, Pemerintah harus mengakui akan kondisi masyarakat yang majemuk dan bahkan memiliki hubungan keluarga, mencoba upaya penyelesaian melalui Pendekatan, sebagai Anggota Tim yang percayakan Pemerintah dan juga demi menjaga kesetabilan daerah, kami meminta perwakilan Kristen menyampaikan pendapat tentang persoalan Rumah Ibadah, mereka mengharapkan Rumah Ibadah diberikan Izin sebanyak 24 di Aceh Singkil, dan hal itu pula kita meminta pandangan Umat islam, tawaran tersebut disambut baik, akan tetapi usulan tersebut tidak disepakati, dan menyampaikan bahwa demi menjaga persaudaraan, umat islam menyepakati jika diberikan toleransi sebanyak 7 Rumah Ibadah. Hal ini pun sudah melampaui kesepakatan tahun 2001.*

"In addressing the regulatory issues concerning the place of worship in Aceh Singkil, the Government must acknowledge the plural community condition and even family relationships, attempting resolution through approaches. As a Team Member entrusted by the Government and responsible for maintaining regional stability, we requested Christian representatives to express their opinions on issues related to places of worship. They hoped that places of worship would be granted permits, numbering 24 in Aceh Singkil, and we also requested the views of the Muslim community. This offer was well received; however, the proposal was not agreed upon, and they conveyed that, in order to maintain kinship, the Muslim community agreed to accept tolerance for seven places of worship. This already exceeded the 2001 agreement."

This interview result shows the government's social approach efforts, but they have not yet reachedreached an agreement. Meanwhile, when agreement was also not reached, due to Christian

community hopes for that number being caused by travel distances and congregations spread across various locations, the government offered the next solution by providing facilities, as evidenced by the Author's interview with Hendra Sudirman, Head of Islamic Community Guidance Section, Ministry of Religious Affairs, as follows:

> *Ketika tidak ada kesepakatan jumlah unit Rumah Ibadah ditemukan, Pemerintah memberikan jalan Alternatif, agar semua harapan terakomodir, Pemerintah mengedepankan kebersamaan dan kekeluargaan, menawarkan dibangunnya Rumah Ibadah dititik yang disepakati dengan ukuran yang disepakati, dan untuk memudahkan Jemaat yang jauh lokasi difasilitasi dengan Transportasi Bus agar mudah menjalankan Ibadah, dan ternyata hal ini juga belum menemukan Solusi, dan saudara Kristen tetap berharap adanya toleransi dari semua pihak agar dapat mengakomodir aspirasi tersebut*(Hendra Sudirman, n.d.).

> "When no agreement on the number of place of worship units was found, the Government provided an alternative path so all hopes could be accommodated. The Government prioritised togetherness and kinship, offering the construction of places of worship at agreed points with agreed sizes, and to facilitate distant congregations, transportation was facilitated with buses for easy worship. However, this also did not find a solution, and Christian brethren still hoped for tolerance from all parties to accommodate those aspirations." (Hendra Sudirman, n.d.).

The explanations from the Head of Conflict Management and National Vigilance, and the Head of the Islamic Community Guidance Section, Ministry of Religious Affairs, above, show efforts undertaken to prioritise agreement and set aside existing regulations, such as PBM Nos. 9 and 8, and Aceh Qanun No. 4 of 2016. However, this has not found a point of agreement; thus, another solution is needed to achieve understanding between the Government and religious communities in Aceh Singkil.

This condition required the Government to seek other solutions. The Government formulated the next alternative solution to resolve this place of worship conflict by forming the Acceleration Team for Place of Worship Conflict Resolution Reconciliation Number 219 of 2019 dated 19 September 2019, involving various parties, including representatives from Muslim and Christian communities, totalling 47 members(K. A. Singkil, 2023). Efforts undertaken by the Local Government in resolving place of worship establishment conflicts in Aceh Singkil through forming the Acceleration Team for place of worship conflict resolution in Aceh Singkil conducted discussions and deliberations, taking agreement steps, hoping to become a meeting point for both parties, but have not yet reached an agreement. This is based on the author's interview results with Assistant III of the Aceh Singkil District Secretariat as follows:

> *Berhubung Pemerintah Aceh Singkil tidak menemukan titik temu yang telah dilakukan melalui Pendekatan dan juga diskusi panjang antara perwakilan umat islam dan Kristen, maka solusi dan langkah terakhir kita sampaikan agar saudara kita dari umat Kristen memenuhi ketentuan sesuai dengan peraturan bersama Menteri No 9 dan 8 serta Qanun Aceh no 4 Tahun 2016*

> "Since the Aceh Singkil Government has not found a meeting point through approaches and lengthy discussions between Muslim and Christian community representatives, the final solution and step we conveyed was for our Christian brethren to meet requirements according to Joint Ministerial Regulation Nos. 9 and 8 and Aceh Qanun No. 4 of 2016."

The Head of Islamic Community Guidance also provided explanations with similar meaning in the

author's interview, as follows:

> *Disaat kita tidak ada mencapai kesepakatan melalui pendekatan social kekeluargaan, kementerian Agama menyampaikan kepada Umat Kristen agar melengkapi persyaratan sesuai dengan peraturan yang berlaku, dan kita tetap memfasilitasi memberikan rekomendasi disaat syarat dilengkapi, karena tidak mungkin juga pemerintah memaksakan mengikuti permohonan umat Kristen, sementara selama ini juga kita melihat umat islam meminta Pemerintah tegas dan semua pihak harus taat aturan, dank arena pelanggaran ini pulalah terjadinya aksi protes dari umat Muslim,*

"When we did not reach agreement through socio-familial approaches, the Ministry of Religious Affairs conveyed to the Christian community to complete requirements according to applicable regulations, and we continue facilitating by providing recommendations when requirements are completed, because the government cannot force following Christian community requests, whilst we also see the Muslim community requesting the Government be firm and all parties must obey regulations. It is because of these violations that protest actions from Muslims occurred."

The interview results above show that no agreement has been produced, whether through mediation, dialogue, or even the government-formed Team. Meanwhile, the Christian community has not been able to meet applicable regulatory requirements. The Aceh Singkil Government submitted a Report to the Aceh government to provide direction and facilitate that resolution, as evidenced by the following interview:

> *"Kesbangpol selalu melakukan monitoring secara rutin, menurunkan tim ke lapangan, dan melakukan klarifikasi terhadap informasi yang berkembang. Upaya ini penting agar tidak ada eskalasi. Selain itu, persoalan rumah ibadah juga pernah dilaporkan ke Pemerintah Aceh, sehingga dibentuk Satgas untuk menangani persoalan ini. Namun, sampai saat ini penyelesaian permanen belum tercapai. Harapan dari Aceh Singkil adalah adanya penyelesaian di tingkat provinsi, terutama antara Pemerintah Aceh dan Sumatera Utara, karena landasan hukumnya ada dalam Qanun Aceh. Sebagai solusi untuk menghindari gesekan ke depan, persoalan ini diharapkan tidak dipolitisasi atau "digoreng" dalam isu politik, serta tidak dilebih-lebihkan oleh media. Semua masyarakat juga hendaknya memahami aturan yang berlaku, sementara pemerintah harus berjalan sesuai koridor hukum dan regulasi yang ada. Ketika ditanyakan mengenai potensi ke depan, Kabid menyampaikan bahwa jika persoalan ini tidak diselesaikan dari sekarang, maka sangat mungkin menjadi persoalan berkepanjangan. Selama ini langkah yang dilakukan pemerintah baru sebatas meredam agar tidak terjadi konflik terbuka, tetapi belum merupakan penyelesaian final terhadap masalah pendirian rumah ibadah di Aceh Singkil."* (Mardhiah, n.d.)

"Kesbangpol always conducts routine monitoring, deploys field teams, and clarifies developing information. These efforts are important to prevent escalation. Additionally, place of worship issues have also been reported to the Aceh Government, resulting in the formation of a Task Force to handle this matter. However, a permanent resolution has not been achieved until now. Hope from Aceh Singkil is for resolution at the provincial level, especially between the Aceh and North Sumatra Governments, because the legal foundation exists in Aceh Qanun. As a solution to avoid future friction, this issue is hoped not be politicised or 'fried' in political issues, nor exaggerated by the media. All communities should also understand applicable rules, whilst the government must

proceed according to legal corridors and existing regulations. When asked about future potential, the Division Head conveyed that if this issue is not resolved from now, it is very possible to become a prolonged problem. Thus far, steps taken by the government have only been limited to dampening to prevent open conflict but not yet constituting a final resolution to places of worship establishment problems in Aceh Singkil." (Mardhiah, n.d.)

The Local Government of Aceh Singkil, in addressing place of worship establishment conflicts, has pursued various layered strategies. The first effort was undertaken through socio-cultural and familial approaches, acknowledging the reality of a plural society with kinship ties. Through dialogue forums, the government provided opportunities for Christian community representatives to convey hopes for obtaining permits for 24 places of worship. However, the Muslim community responded with a tolerance limit of only seven places of worship, a number deemed to exceed the 2001 agreement already. This difference in views caused agreement not to be reached. When the socio-cultural path had not found a meeting point, the government turned to dialogue and mediation strategies. The Ministry of Religious Affairs, through Islamic Community Guidance, offered alternatives in the form of place of worship construction at certain points with agreed sizes and bus transportation facilities to facilitate congregations living far from locations. However, this offer also could not fully accommodate Christian community aspirations; thus deadlock remained.

In efforts to unravel the deadlock, the government formed the Aceh Singkil Place of Worship Conflict Resolution Reconciliation Team in 2019, comprising 47 members from Muslim, Christian, and related institution elements. This team was hoped to find a meeting point through discussion and deliberation. However, expected results were also not yet realised. In Islamic communication theory, conflict resolution should ideally be based on the principles of deliberation, justice ('adl), and avoiding domination by one party. However, practice in the field shows that deliberation has not achieved these objectives because it is still caught up in institutional interests. The difference in the number of houses of worship desired remains a fundamental issue, so that the team acts more as a space for communication than a final decision maker.

Differences in desired numbers of places of worship remained a fundamental issue; thus, the team functioned more as a communication space rather than a final decision-maker. Realising that dialogue approaches had not borne fruit, the government ultimately re-emphasised a regulatory approach. Joint Ministerial Regulation (PBM) Numbers 9 and 8 of 2006 and Aceh Qanun Number 4 of 2016 were made the basis for resolving issues. The Government requested the Christian community to complete the requirements according to those regulations. This assertion also constituted a response to Muslim community pressure demanding government firmness and all parties' obedience to applicable rules.

Nevertheless, because the Christian community experienced difficulties in meeting requirements as regulated, the conflict still has not found a final solution. This condition prompted the Aceh Singkil District Government to report the issue to the provincial level. This was done because Aceh Qanun, as the main regulation, is a product of the Aceh Government. Additionally, conflict dynamics apparently also received attention from Church Officials in Dairi, North Sumatra, showing that this issue has cross-regional dimensions.

Thus, the government's communication strategy still appears to be reactive rather than transformative. Regulations are used as a final guideline, but they are not yet fully capable of managing complex social relations. This finding enriches the literature that government communication in a pluralistic society requires a hybrid approach—combining regulation, dialogue, and customs equally to

create sustainable social cohesion.

### 3.3 Effectiveness of Aceh Singkil Government Communication Strategy

Overall, local government communication in handling place of worship establishment conflicts in Aceh Singkil can be deemed effective at the prevention and issue control stage, because it succeeded in maintaining that the conflict did not widen into horizontal conflict amongst religious communities. However, this communication effectiveness remains limited in long-term resolution aspects, because it has not produced a final decision jointly agreed upon by both parties. The main strength of government communication lies in narrative control, utilisation of formal and informal channels, and multi-party involvement, capable of creating temporary social stability. However, its weakness lies in the lack of concrete follow-up in the form of regulations or written decisions; thus, conflict tends to recur. Therefore, the effectiveness of Aceh Singkil local government communication remains partial: sufficiently successful in dampening short-term conflicts but not yet fully capable of creating permanent solutions that are fair and acceptable to all parties. The issue of houses of worship in Aceh Singkil shows that the effectiveness of government communication is greatly influenced by regulations, perceptions of justice, and majority-minority social relations. These three factors form the basis of analysis in assessing the effectiveness of government communication.

Place of worship establishment problems in Aceh Singkil, as explained by informants, reveal complexity not only related to religious needs but also concerning regulations, local government communication patterns, and socio-cultural dynamics of society. According to Mardhiah, SH, as Head of Conflict Management Division, Kesbangpol and Civil Defence, the issue of place of worship establishment has been ongoing for a long time, even before 1979, and continues to recur until now. The local government, through Kesbangpol, routinely conducts monitoring and goes directly to the field to ensure information accuracy. This is important because often issues developing in media are exaggerated, thus attracting national attention, even generating assessments of intolerance. In contrast, the social reality of society shows quite high levels of tolerance. Government communication patterns are built by receiving aspirations from both Muslim and Christian communities, and then followed up through dialogue. From the perspective of conflict communication theory, Kesbangpol's monitoring measures can be categorized as preventive communication. However, the reviewer notes that prevention alone is not a measure of effectiveness if it does not result in structural resolution.

However, although compromise has been facilitated in the form of place of worship quotas and congregation transportation alternatives, these efforts have not necessarily produced agreement because Christians remain steadfast regarding their proposed numbers. In such conditions, the local government emphasises the importance of meeting requirements according to Aceh Qanun Number 4 of 2016, though this is deemed burdensome by churches. As a preventive measure, the government, together with related elements such as FKUB, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Civil Service Police Unit, WH, and Muslim and Christian community representatives, agreed to temporarily halt construction or rehabilitation of places of worship without permits until further resolution(Mardhiah, n.d.). H. Widodo, SKM, M.Kes adds that regulatory effectiveness in supporting government communication patterns is clearly visible through the existence of the Inter-Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB). FKUB functions as an official forum bringing together cross-religious representatives for dialogue, monitoring developments, and controlling potential friction. Additionally, cross-sectoral coordination involving the Islamic Sharia Office, Civil Service Police Unit and WH, Kesbangpol, and religious and customary leaders demonstrates that local government communication proceeds participatively and responsively.

Thus, every emerging issue can be immediately handled, whether through routine or incidental meetings, so conflict does not develop more widely(Edi Widodo, n.d.).

In line with this, Asmaruddin, SH, as Assistant III of the Aceh Singkil District Secretariat, emphasises that regulations greatly support the government communication pattern's success. The Government makes the Joint Decree of 2 Ministers and Aceh Qanun Number 4 of 2016 the main reference in every place of worship issue resolution. This legal foundation is deemed important because Aceh has specificity in religious life governance. For the local government, openness in receiving aspirations, neutrality in maintaining Muslim and non-Muslim interests, and seriousness in socialising regulations become main capital in building communication legitimacy. These regulations provide a firm legal footing so the government can maintain a balance between non-Muslim residents' needs and the majority Muslim community's interests(Asmardin, n.d.). Regulations do strengthen the government's position, but overly bureaucratic regulations can generate resistance from minorities, preventing communication from being fully transformational.

Nevertheless, the Chair of the Aceh Singkil Customary Council views that local government communication pattern effectiveness remains limited. He assesses that although there has been a special team formation and several meetings between provincial and district governments, the steps taken have not produced a final resolution. Community social harmony is actually well maintained, but when place of worship issues intersect with formal regulations, tensions tend to emerge. The main deficiency in his view is insufficient involvement of customary leaders in official conflict resolution teams. In contrast, customary values, language, kinship, and local wisdom constitute important capital for bridging differences and strengthening cross-faith communication. Furthermore, government communication effectiveness has not been maximised because often actors involved do not possess sufficient social legitimacy in the eyes of disputing communities(Pohan, n.d.). This finding clarifies that the effectiveness of communication cannot be measured solely by the formality of the meeting, but must also consider the social legitimacy of the actors delivering the message.

From these four perspectives, it can be understood that the effectiveness of local government communication patterns in resolving place of worship conflicts in Aceh Singkil is determined by two main matters. First, the existence of strong regulations in the form of the Joint Decree of 2 Ministers and Aceh Qanun Number 4 of 2016, which becomes a legal foundation for the government to maintain order and provide procedural certainty. Second, the existence of participative communication efforts through FKUB and cross-sectoral coordination is relatively responsive. However, limitations remain, especially because regulations are often deemed burdensome by churches, and government approaches still emphasise administrative aspects more than cultural ones. Therefore, better integration is needed between formal regulations and socio-cultural approaches, especially through involving customary leaders and respected community members. This is important so government communication patterns not only prevent conflict but also can produce solutions more sincerely accepted by all parties and sustainable. These findings indicate that the communication efforts of the Aceh Singkil government show strong performance in terms of message clarity and participation, moderate performance in terms of feedback and trust building, but weak performance in terms of conflict transformation. This explains why conflicts can be managed and prevented from escalating, but have not yet resulted in a permanent resolution that is acceptable to all parties.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the conflict surrounding the establishment of houses of worship in Aceh Singkil is cyclical and deeply rooted in structural and socio-historical factors rather than purely theological differences. The persistence of conflict is shaped by the misalignment between formal regulations, the practical needs of local communities, and evolving social perceptions grounded in collective memory and identity tensions. These findings affirm a phenomenological perspective in which community experiences and historical narratives significantly influence patterns of religious conflict. In response, the Aceh Singkil Regional Government has adopted a multidimensional communication strategy that integrates formal-administrative mechanisms, persuasive dialogue, early conflict detection, reconciliation-based collaboration, and coordination with the provincial level. This integrative approach reflects an effort to combine regulatory instruments, local wisdom, and interfaith engagement to maintain social stability and prevent conflict escalation.

Despite its relative success in reducing short-term tensions and preventing open conflict, the long-term effectiveness of the government's communication strategy remains limited. This limitation stems primarily from insufficient involvement of grassroots religious and customary leaders with strong social legitimacy, as well as the absence of a definitive provincial-level policy that accommodates Aceh's special characteristics and provides legal certainty. Consequently, conflict resolution has remained temporary and managerial, rather than transformative. Theoretically, this study contributes to conflict communication scholarship by highlighting the central role of local legitimacy and multi-level governance in managing religious conflict. Practically, it underscores the need to strengthen the involvement of interfaith forums, customary institutions, and community networks to foster more inclusive, sustainable, and long-term conflict transformation.

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