

First Essay

Freedom of Religion amid Polarization and Religious Moderation Policy

SUHADI CHOLIL

STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY SUNAN KALIJAGA YOGYAKARTA, YOGYAKARTA;
NATIONAL RESEARCH AND INNOVATION AGENCY INDONESIA (BRIN), JAKARTA

suhadi.cholil@uin-suka.ac.id

ABSTRACT

To address religious extremism and radicalism, the Indonesian government initiated the idea of “religious moderation” as an official state policy centered at the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Since 2019 the government has published books, guidance, and held various trainings on religious moderation, especially in institutions related to the Ministry. It also develops religious moderation instruments to ensure that government employees and officials, especially those within the Ministry, are free from exposure to extremism and radicalism. The idea is presented by the government as appreciating, respecting, and protecting the valued religious pluralism in Indonesia. But this article also argues that, upon critical examination, there are tensions between this idea and freedom of religion or belief in Indonesia. The religious moderation policy may run counter to freedom of religion or expression and overlooks central weaknesses in the existing state governance of religion.

Keywords

Moderation, freedom, harmony, critical perspective, governance of religion

This essay examines the development of the state policy of religious moderation, three years after its initiation, in the context of contemporary Indonesian polarization. It analyzes the challenges of religious freedom during the massive religious moderation campaign led by the Indonesian government.

The politics of religious moderation have become mainstream in some Muslim countries and in countries where Muslims are a significant minority. This has become especially apparent since the 9/11 attacks, the rise of Islamic extremist groups, as well as increased levels of Islamophobia. Contemporary studies on religious moderation policy in Egypt, Morocco,

Indonesia (Pektas 2021), Kenya (Meinema 2021), Norway (Van Es 2021), and Russia (Aitamurto 2021) demonstrate a trend towards religious securitization. In Indonesia, the politics of religious securitization as a global phenomenon, combined with the threat of domestic polarization triggered by the emergence of hardline Muslim groups in the country, has shaped religious moderation policy. In this context, Indonesia is subject to what Greg Fealy (2020) calls “repressive pluralism.” The term “repressive pluralism” refers to the “large-scale social engineering designed to deter Indonesians from pursuing a conservative Islamic lifestyle and Islamist political objectives. The intent is to sufficiently pressure Islamists either to leave their positions or to relinquish their views and affiliations” (Fealy 2020: 313).

Religion-Based Polarization

The concept of religious polarization calls to mind Merle Ricklefs’ work, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to Present* (Ricklefs 2012). In his conclusion, Ricklef wrote the trajectory of post *santri-abangan* polarisation.⁸ Following the decline of *abangan*, Ricklefs talked about the trend of polarization within Indonesian Muslim societies in contemporary Indonesia. Robert Hefner (2011) also discussed the trend of weakening *abangan* in his article, “Where have all the *abangan* gone? Religionization and the Decline of Non-Standard Islam in Contemporary Indonesia”.

The Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017 triggered increased religious polarization in Indonesia when the Christian Indonesian–Chinese governor Ahok, was forced to step down and was sentenced to prison for blasphemy. News of this event resulted in a series of huge, unprecedented mass demonstrations of Muslims who claimed that Ahok had insulted Islam—which was not true—and for that reason he *did* not deserve to be the governor of the province of Jakarta, which has a Muslim majority population. The polarization did not stop there but continued until the presidential election in 2019. The state policy of religious moderation can be understood in the context of this ongoing polarization.

Qualitative evidence from an interview with a key informant suggests that the government initiated the religious moderation policy in order to disrupt this worsening polarization in Indonesia. According to one interviewee, an initiator of the policy of religious moderation:

8. *Santri* refers to Muslims who display a visible Islamic identity and strictly implement Islamic norms in their lives. *Abangan* refers mainly to nominal Muslims or those who may be syncretic.

When the subjective religious interpretation and political interests were mixed, there would be a conflict like what happened in DKI [Jakarta]. It was clear that the political polarization was then justified by religious interpretation. They [a certain group] claimed that it was legitimate not to pray for the bodies of those considered infidels [non-Muslims], that [Muslims were] supporting infidels [in the Jakarta election], namely Ahok. This was really an interpretation, but it has been growing, and it overlapped with political interests. So, we have to manage this properly.... When the polarization occurred during the General Election in DKI [Jakarta], for example, the implication was disunity in the nation. The polarization caused by religious interpretation was very dangerous. So, I have an interest—and seriously participate—in formulating [policy focused on religious moderation]. (Interview with OF, 1 May 2021)

The former Minister of Religious Affairs (2014–2019), Lukman Hakim Saifuddin, played an important role as the initiator of religious moderation in Indonesia. But the religious moderation project has had a continued legacy, extending beyond Saifuddin's time as minister. President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) accepted this policy and made it his goal to advance religious moderation in the country. After Jokowi inaugurated Yaqut Cholil Qoumas as the Minister of Religious Affairs in 2020, Yaqut stated that “religious moderation is President Jokowi's mandatory program, and I will seriously continue the religious moderation programs” (Qoumas 2020). It is not surprising that we can easily identify religious moderation as Jokowi's strong ideological contribution to the 2020–2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan. It is clear that the government, especially the Ministry of Religious Affairs, firmly institutionalized the policy to ensure that the religious moderation project will be continued during the second period of Jokowi's presidency (2019–2024).

Religious Moderation and its Evolution

What does religious moderation mean? The official publication of the Ministry of Religious Affairs writes that *moderat* (“moderate” in Bahasa Indonesia) is an adjective meaning “not excessive or mediocre” (*tidak berlebih-lebihan atau berarti sedang*). Its comparable term in Arabic is *wasathiyah* (middle path). Thus, religious moderation means to have a “perspective, attitude, and behavior which always take a middle position and to act fairly and not extreme in being religious” (Kementerian Agama RI 2019: 1, 17–18). In addition, one of my interviewees characterized moderation as

a pendulum that moves from one extreme (left) to another extreme (right) and always tends to end up in the center or axis (centripetal). It is never

static, but dynamic and always moves to find a balance from the extreme left (liberal) to the extreme right (ultra-conservative) or the other way around. (Interview with AS, 2 April 2021)

Since one of the concerns of religious moderation is to fight religious extremism, then the question arises: What kind of attitude qualifies as extremism? It is interesting to observe the discourse on religious moderation as it relates to extremism. The initiators and proponents of religious moderation argue two positions on extremism. First, the right wing of religious extremism (*ekstrem kanan/agama*) includes ultra-conservative, fanatic, exclusive, radical, fundamentalist, purist groups, those who advance the literal interpretation of the Holy Book, Islamists, jihadists, etc. Second, the left wing of secular extremism (*ekstrem kiri/sekuler*) includes those who believe in the privatization of religion, the promotion of rationalism in the interpretation of the Holy Book, and those who believe in universal absolute freedom, human rights, and individualism. Those two extreme positions are to be moderated by the religious moderation project. A moderate position is a non-extreme position that puts self-control first. It requires being responsible and taking a balanced, inclusive approach, while advancing the contextual interpretation of scripture.

Some complex issues are as yet unresolved in the religious moderation movement. For instance, there has been significant discussion regarding what kind of attitudes moderates should consider liberal/secular (the left extreme). Among other things, religious moderates do not include LGBTQIA+ individuals and ideologies in their considerations. In an interview with a key informant, the interviewee discussed their experience in a religious moderation workshop. They mentioned that the facilitator discussed their efforts to create a center for religious moderation (called Rumah Moderasi Beragama or in English: House of Religious Moderation) within the university. The purpose of the center was to fight so-called liberal movements like pro-LGBTQIA+ ideas and practices (Interview with AW, 5 May 2022). Other sensitive religious issues include the rights of minority groups within Islam, such as Shia, Ahmadiya, Millah Abraham, etc., and the role of other religious splinter groups. Religious moderation often avoids taking a position on these complex issues or discussing them publicly so that an amicable intrareligious relations among Muslims can be maintained.

One informant who had authored a book called *Implementation of Religious Moderation in Islamic Education* argued that people must prioritize humanity, rather than evaluate other religious groups as suggested by the principle of religious moderation. Moreover, he emphasized the value of justice, non-violence, (loyalty to) the Constitution, and appreciation of diversity as

core principles of religious moderation (Interview with AM, 29 April 2021). But his book, published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, self-referentially discussed its important role as an operational guide “to assess whether an act deserves to be classified as religious defamation/blasphemy or not” (Kementerian Agama RI 2019b: v). Here we see some incongruity between the value of religious moderation and the actions taken by its advocates. This is apparent at the highest levels of leadership in Indonesia, including the Ministry of Religious Affairs, since the government leverages the blasphemy law to limit the religious rights of minority groups such as the Ahmadiya, Shi’a, Jehovah Witnesses, Hare Khrisna, etc.

Religious moderation provides indicators of moderation, which politicians use as an instrument to promote certain government officials, candidates, or civil services. In some Islamic universities, the selection of candidates includes religious moderation as one criterion by asking questions such as whether a candidate supports hardline or conservative organizations such as the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia or the Islamic Defender Front (Interview with AS, 2 April 2021). Religious moderation, therefore, becomes an instrument of ideological screening.

It is also important, however, to note that the religious moderation project has evolved over time. Especially after the formulation of the roadmap for religious moderation (2020), a year after the publication of the main text, the religious moderation movement has avoided the notion of the extreme right and the extreme left. Instead, it puts more emphasis on building tolerance in Indonesia’s plural society. Towards this end, religious moderation tends to become a kind of training program sponsored by the government. The religious moderation roadmap provides four new indicators of religious moderation: (a) commitment to Indonesian nationalism, (b) tolerance, (c) non-violence, and (d) acceptance of the (local) tradition. In addition, the religious moderation project has recently begun to utilize religion as a cultural strategy to strengthen the multicultural ecosystem in Indonesia. Because it touches on various aspects of society, such as education, religion, media, politics, and the state, proponents of religious moderation see the multicultural ecosystem as a benefit (Tim Kelompok Kerja Moderasi Beragama Kementerian Agama RI 2020).

Religious Moderation, Harmony, and the Challenge of Religious Freedom

The emergence of the religious moderation project poses a challenge to religious freedom or beliefs. Since the mid-1960s, a paradigm and state policy of harmony (*kerukunan*) emerged in Indonesia. The main concern of the

harmony paradigm was to overcome conflicts between religious groups—at that time between Muslims and Christians—especially related to Christian missionary activities. Social order, rather than religious freedom, was a key concern of the harmony paradigm. In subsequent conflict management practices, governmental agencies continued to use this paradigm. Inter- or intrareligious conflicts are now resolved according to the governmental guidelines related to citizens' duty to maintain social order. Often government officials, including the police and the military, are also involved in (interreligious) dialogue as they seek to achieve social order in villages or at the sub-district level. In these cases, the voice of the religious majority is usually prioritized.

Especially in the case of conflicts between some mainstream Muslim groups and the Ahmadiyya or Shi'a Muslim minorities, government officials prioritized the voice of the mainstream Muslim population over the voice of the respective religious minority group. This strategy was based on the argument that it would allow for the conflict situation to be immediately contained. In some cases of violent conflicts that were brought to the court, not only were the mainstream groups that perpetrated attacks punished, but so were the Ahmadiyah or Shi'a minority figures who were subjected to violence. In these cases, the court considered the religious minority figures to be triggering the conflict or violating the limitations of the blasphemy law. For example, in a case of conflict between the mainstream Muslim majority and the Shi'a group, a Shi'a member died and a Shi'a's residence in Madura was burned. The court sentenced the Shi'a leader to a much longer prison sentence than the attackers from the mainstream Muslim group that perpetrated the attack.

Criticism of the religious harmony paradigm emerged from the civil society movement in the early 1990s. Critics base their scepticism on the paradigm of freedom or human rights, more specifically FORB. While the harmony paradigm prioritizes social order, the freedom paradigm prioritizes equality and social justice. At first glance, this paradigm of freedom may seem new, but, in fact, it has deep roots in the Indonesian Constitution since 1945.

In a debate to review the Constitution in the late 1950s, the idea of human rights explicitly became a lively topic of discussion in the Indonesian parliament. Yet, it was not until 1999 that Indonesia officially had a bill of rights. In 2002, the Indonesian parliament passed a constitutional amendment that included human rights in the Constitution. Compared to the harmony paradigm, the rights-based or freedom paradigm has firmer ground in the Constitution and Indonesian national law. Later, in 2005, the Indonesian government ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

(ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ECOSOB).

If we read official government documents, such as the 2022–2024 Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, it appears that religious moderation still follows the paradigm of harmony. Several proponents of religious moderation, including one research participant, explain the relationship between religious harmony and moderation as follows: harmony is seen as a goal, and religious moderation is the path to that goal (Interview with OF, 1 May 2021; Interview with AS, 2 April 2021). Currently, in the government documents on religion, policy often uses the terms harmony and religious moderation concurrently, while the documents fail to mention FORB.

This brings us to a further critique of current state governance of religion. The religious moderation project focuses on moderating the citizens' religious views. But making people more moderate is not sufficient to address the problems that the project highlights. For instance, one's religious worldview is not the cause of the conflicts among religious groups, terrorism, or radicalization that the project aims to dissolve. Second, the religious moderation project is a distraction from the constitutionally sanctioned duty of the government to uphold FORB, including the need to improve the legal framework of current religious governance. For one, the Indonesian governance still prioritizes the six religions administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs while marginalizing smaller, non-mainstream religious groups and "non-world" (indigenous or local) religions. Other parts of the legal framework, such as the persistence of the blasphemy law, run counter not only to FORB, but also to religious moderation itself, as it legally incentivizes intolerance among the mainstream groups against non-mainstream counterparts. This, again, shows the mistaken assumptions and priorities set by the religious moderation project.

Conclusion

The discussion above shows the complex politics of religion in the context of post-independence Indonesia. The paradigm of harmony persists as the main paradigm, and the recent large-scale project of religious moderation adheres to this framework. The policy of religious moderation initially sought to answer the challenges of religious revivalism and extremism. It could, however, become the government's soft power strategy to determine an Indonesian religious standard (Sutanto, Cholil, Wahyuningtyas, and Putra 2022: 85). I mentioned the indicators of this developing standard earlier in this essay. Simultaneously, and perhaps incongruously, human rights and FORB have quite strong roots in the Constitution and laws of Indonesia.

Thus, the Indonesian government must seriously address these contrasts and potential tensions between religious moderation and FORB. In terms of practice, the main principles of FORB include non-discrimination and non-coercion; government and its apparatus bear the duty to uphold these principles. (Bagir and Sormin 2022: 177). In the midst of the Indonesian government's intense campaign of religious moderation, it becomes even more important to continuously remind the government of its duties to improve human rights and FORB in the country.

References

- Aitamurto, Kaarina. 2021. "Patriotic Loyalty and Interest Representation among the Russian Islamic Elite," *Religion*, 51:2, 280–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2021.1865604>
- Bagir, Zainal Abidin, and Jimmy M.I. Sormin. 2022. "Epilog: Cukupkah Menjadi Moderat?" In *Politik Moderasi Beragama: Suatu Tinjauan Kritis*. Edited by Zainal Abidin Bagir and Jimmy M.I. Sormin, 167–180. Jakarta: Elex Media Komputindo.
- Es, Margaretha A. van. 2021. "Norwegian Muslims Denouncing Terrorism: Beyond 'Moderate' versus 'Radical'?" *Religion* 51(2): 169–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2021.1865600>
- Fealy, Greg. 2020. "Jokowi in the Covid-19 Era: Repressive Pluralism, Dynasticism and the Overbearing State." *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 56(3): 301–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2020.1846482>
- Hefner, Robert. 2011. "Where have all the abangan gone? Religionization and the Decline of Non-Standard Islam in Contemporary Indonesia." In *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia: Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention in Java and Bali*. Edited by Michel Picard and Rémy Madinier. London: Routledge.
- Kelompok Kerja Implementasi Moderasi Beragama Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Islam Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia. 2019. *Implementasi Moderasi Beragama dalam Pendidikan Islam*. Jakarta: Kementerian Agama RI.
- Kementerian Agama RI. 2019. *Moderasi Beragama*. Jakarta: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI.
- Pektas, Serafettin. 2021. "A Comparative Analysis of Three Sunni Muslim Organizations on 'Moderate' and 'Radical' Islam in Egypt, Morocco and Indonesia." *Religion* 51(2): 190–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2020.1868383>
- Meinema, Erik. 2021. "Countering 'Islamic' Violent Extremism? The Implementation of Programs to Prevent Radicalization by Muslim-led Civil Society Organizations in Malindi, Kenya." *Religion* 51(2): 259–279. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2021.1865603>
- Ricklefs, M. 2012. *Islamisation and its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to Present*. Singapore: NUS Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1qv3fh>

- Sutanto, Trisno S. et al. 2022. “Menakar Moderasi Beragama: Pembacaan Kritis.” In *Politik Moderasi Beragama: Suatu Tinjauan Kritis*. Edited by Zainal Abidin Bagir and Jimmy M.I. Sormin, 1–91. Jakarta: Elex Media Komputindo.
- Qoumas, Yaqut Cholil. 2020. “Serius dalam Penguatan Moderasi Beragama.” <https://kemenag.go.id/read/serius-dalam-penguatan-moderasi-beragama-nvdpy-nvdpy>.
- Tim Kelompok Kerja Moderasi Beragama Kementerian Agama RI. 2020. *Peta Jalan (Roadmap) Penguatan Moderasi Beragama Tahun 2020-2024*. Jakarta: Kementerian Agama RI.