

## Religious Moderation in Shaping Interfaith Relations: A Comparative Study of Indonesia and Malaysia

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**Abstract:** This study aims to examine the role of religious moderation in shaping interfaith relations in Indonesia and Malaysia. The research investigates how state policies and community-based initiatives contribute to social harmony and interfaith cooperation. It also seeks to identify the challenges each country faces in promoting religious moderation and its impact on Muslim-Christian interactions. The research employs a qualitative comparative approach, incorporating in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and focus group discussions with religious leaders, government officials, and interfaith activists. Data collection was conducted in key regions with diverse religious populations, including Yogyakarta and Surabaya in Indonesia, as well as Kuala Lumpur and Selangor in Malaysia. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in religious moderation practices and their influence on interfaith harmony. The study finds that Malaysia's religious moderation is actively supported by government policies, resulting in a more structured and dynamic interfaith environment. The National Unity Blueprint and other pluralism-oriented initiatives have contributed to stronger cooperation among religious communities. In contrast, Indonesia's religious moderation efforts remain largely formal and symbolic, facing cultural resistance, particularly in rural areas. Limited local government support and socio-historical tensions further hinder effective interfaith engagement in Indonesia. The findings underscore the importance of government involvement in shaping interfaith harmony. The study suggests that Indonesia could benefit from adopting a more structured approach to religious moderation, integrating state-backed policies with grassroots engagement. The research also highlights the role of religious education and interfaith dialogue in reducing social tensions and fostering inclusive religious pluralism. This research contributes a novel comparative perspective on religious moderation by systematically analyzing policies and their social impact in two multicultural nations. Unlike previous studies that focus solely on qualitative descriptions, this study incorporates empirical insights into the effectiveness of religious moderation policies in fostering interfaith harmony. The findings provide valuable recommendations for policymakers and religious leaders in designing more effective pluralism strategies to enhance interfaith cooperation.

**Keywords:** Indonesia; Interfaith Dialogue; Malaysia; Pluralism; Religious Moderation; Social Harmony.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran moderasi agama dalam membentuk hubungan antar agama di Indonesia dan Malaysia. Penelitian ini menyelidiki bagaimana kebijakan negara dan inisiatif berbasis masyarakat berkontribusi terhadap harmoni sosial dan kerja sama antaragama. Penelitian ini juga berupaya mengidentifikasi tantangan yang dihadapi masing-masing negara dalam mempromosikan moderasi beragama dan dampaknya terhadap interaksi Muslim-Kristen. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan komparatif kualitatif, yang menggabungkan wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan diskusi kelompok terfokus dengan para pemuka agama, pejabat pemerintah, dan aktivis lintas agama. Pengumpulan data dilakukan di daerah-daerah utama dengan populasi agama yang beragam, termasuk Yogyakarta dan Surabaya di Indonesia, serta Kuala Lumpur dan Selangor di Malaysia. Analisis tematik digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi pola-

pola dalam praktik moderasi agama dan pengaruhnya terhadap kerukunan antaragama. Studi ini menemukan bahwa moderasi agama di Malaysia secara aktif didukung oleh kebijakan pemerintah, sehingga menghasilkan lingkungan antar agama yang lebih terstruktur dan dinamis. Cetak Biru Persatuan Nasional dan inisiatif-inisiatif lain yang berorientasi pada pluralisme telah berkontribusi pada kerja sama yang lebih kuat di antara komunitas-komunitas agama. Sebaliknya, upaya moderasi agama di Indonesia sebagian besar masih bersifat formal dan simbolis, dan menghadapi resistensi budaya, terutama di daerah pedesaan. Terbatasnya dukungan pemerintah daerah dan ketegangan sosio-historis semakin menghambat keterlibatan antaragama yang efektif di Indonesia. Temuan ini menggarisbawahi pentingnya keterlibatan pemerintah dalam membentuk kerukunan antar agama. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Indonesia dapat mengambil manfaat dari mengadopsi pendekatan yang lebih terstruktur terhadap moderasi agama, mengintegrasikan kebijakan yang didukung negara dengan keterlibatan akar rumput. Penelitian ini juga menyoroti peran pendidikan agama dan dialog antaragama dalam mengurangi ketegangan sosial dan mendorong pluralisme agama yang inklusif. Penelitian ini menyumbangkan perspektif komparatif baru tentang moderasi beragama dengan menganalisis secara sistematis kebijakan dan dampak sosialnya di dua negara multikultural. Tidak seperti penelitian sebelumnya yang hanya berfokus pada deskripsi kualitatif, penelitian ini menggabungkan wawasan empiris ke dalam efektivitas kebijakan moderasi agama dalam mendorong kerukunan antaragama. Temuan-temuannya memberikan rekomendasi yang berharga bagi para pembuat kebijakan dan pemimpin agama dalam merancang strategi pluralisme yang lebih efektif untuk meningkatkan kerja sama antar agama.

**Kata Kunci:** Indonesia; Dialog Antar Agama; Malaysia; Pluralisme; Moderasi Agama; Kerukunan Sosial.

## 1. Introduction

Interfaith relations, particularly between Muslim and Christian communities, are a crucial issue in multicultural countries like Indonesia and Malaysia. These countries, both with a Muslim majority, face unique challenges in maintaining harmony amidst religious diversity. In Indonesia, the presence of over 86% Muslims coexisting with minority Christian populations (10.7%) reflects the dynamic and sometimes tense interfaith relationships that arise due to cultural and historical factors (BPS, 2020). Malaysia, while also predominantly Muslim (63.5%), has adopted a more formalised pluralism policy aimed at fostering harmony among its diverse ethnic and religious groups, including Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus (GHDx, 2021). However, tensions persist in both countries, such as disputes over places of worship and the role of religion in public policies, which highlight the need for sustained efforts to promote interfaith harmony (Ibrahim, 2014; Rehayati, 2011).

Religious moderation, as a concept that encourages tolerance, openness, and interfaith dialogue, has emerged as a vital strategy to address these challenges. By fostering mutual understanding and cooperation, religious moderation can act as a bridge to mitigate conflict and promote harmony. For instance, interfaith forums in Malaysia, such as the *Interfaith Harmony Week*, have successfully facilitated dialogue, whereas similar efforts in Indonesia have encountered cultural resistance, particularly in rural areas (Hakim et al., 2023). This underscores the importance of examining how religious moderation influences interfaith relationships within the distinct socio-political contexts of these two nations.

Interfaith relations in Indonesia and Malaysia have been the subject of extensive academic study, with numerous studies addressing the dynamics of religious moderation in building social harmony. A number of studies have highlighted the role of the state in regulating interfaith interactions, with different approaches between the two countries. In Indonesia, the relationship between religion and the state is symbiotic, with Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution providing the basis for the regulation of religious pluralism (Safa'at, 2022). The existence of the Indonesian Draft Law on Inter-religious Harmony shows the government's efforts in managing inter-religious interactions, although this regulation still faces debates in the context of democratisation and the right to freedom of religion

(Crouch, 2013). Meanwhile, Malaysia adopts a secular system with Islam as the official state religion, where the Federal Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but with certain limitations for non-Muslim groups in the realm of law and public policy (Ismail & Mujani, 2012). Although this model of state-religion relations has been widely studied, previous research has not systematically compared the effectiveness of religious moderation policies in creating social stability in the two countries.

In addition, challenges in interfaith relations continue to be a major concern in academic discourse. A number of studies highlight how religious conflict and intolerance still occur in Indonesia, despite constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom (Yasin & Mantu, 2021). Some studies emphasise that religious education can be an instrument to reduce intolerance and build awareness of pluralism from an early age (Parker, 2014). However, this approach still faces obstacles in its implementation in various regions, especially in areas with a strong influence of religious conservatism. Malaysia, on the other hand, faces a different challenge, where resistance to interfaith dialogue comes from conservative Muslim groups who perceive interfaith dialogue as a threat to Islamic supremacy (Syed Ismail al-Qudsy et al., 2016). Initiatives such as *Interfaith Harmony Week* have attempted to strengthen interfaith relations, but barriers remain in terms of public acceptance and the effectiveness of the policies implemented (Zarif, 2023). While various studies have addressed this issue, there is limited research measuring the concrete impact of interfaith dialogue on social harmony, so an empirical data-driven approach is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives.

In addition to the role of the state and social challenges, the comparison of religious moderation policies in Indonesia and Malaysia is also an important aspect in the study of inter-religious relations. Indonesia tends to rely on community-based initiatives in building religious moderation, such as programmes run by religious and civil society organisations (Sari, 2022). However, the implementation of these programmes still often encounters cultural barriers and resistance at the local level (Pangalila & Rumbay, 2024). Meanwhile, Malaysia has a more structured pluralism policy with clearer regulations governing interfaith relations (Walters, 2007). However, this policy has also faced criticism for favouring the Muslim community over other religious groups (Ismail & Mujani, 2012). In this context, comparative studies on the effectiveness of religious moderation policies in both countries are still very limited, especially those that use quantitative approaches to assess their impact on social harmony.

Based on the previous research, there are still several research gaps that need to be filled. First, previous studies have mostly used a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis, so there is still a lack of empirical data-based exploration of the relationship between religious moderation and social harmony. Secondly, studies comparing pluralism policies in Indonesia and Malaysia are still minimal, especially in measuring the effectiveness of policies implemented in different social contexts. Thirdly, research on interfaith dialogue in both countries mostly only explores the factors that contribute to its success or failure, without providing a quantitative analysis of the concrete impact on social relations and the level of trust between religious communities. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap with a quantitative approach that compares the impact of religious moderation on interfaith harmony in Indonesia and Malaysia, and provides more targeted policy recommendations based on the empirical findings.

This research aims to address the gaps identified in previous studies on religious moderation and interfaith relations in Indonesia and Malaysia. Previous studies have mostly used descriptive qualitative approaches without presenting quantitative analyses that empirically measure the contribution of religious moderation to interfaith harmony. In addition, there has been no research that systematically compares the effectiveness of religious moderation policies in the two countries in different social and political contexts. Therefore, this study aims to quantitatively measure the extent to which religious moderation contributes to maintaining interreligious harmony in Indonesia and Malaysia by examining its influence on social interaction and the stability of interreligious relations.

This research departs from the hypothesis that religious moderation plays a significant role in building inter faith harmony in Indonesia and Malaysia, with interfaith dialogue and education as key factors that strengthen its influence. Religious moderation, defined as a balanced and inclusive approach to religious practice, is believed to promote tolerance and interfaith understanding in

multicultural societies (Raharjo & Yahya, 2023; Sulaiman et al., 2022). In this context, interreligious dialogue serves as a key mechanism to enhance mutual respect and understanding, reduce misunderstandings, and strengthen social relations through shared values (Idi & Priansyah, 2023; Muslih et al., 2023). In addition, educational institutions play a strategic role in instilling religious moderation values, where schools and universities become learning spaces for the younger generation to understand and manage the dynamics of interfaith relations more constructively (Khasanah et al., 2023). Based on this theoretical foundation, this study tests the conjecture that religious moderation has a significant positive influence on interreligious harmony, with its effectiveness that can be influenced by state policy factors and educational approaches applied in each country. The analysis in this study will explore how the relationship between religious moderation, interfaith dialogue and education can create stronger social stability in Indonesia and Malaysia.

## 2. Methods

This study focuses on the Muslim and Christian communities in Indonesia and Malaysia as the primary units of analysis. In Indonesia, the research was conducted in provinces such as North Sulawesi and Central Java, which are known for their high levels of religious diversity. North Sulawesi is renowned for its history of harmonious interfaith relationships, whereas Central Java presents challenges in the form of interfaith tensions in certain areas. In Malaysia, the research locations include Selangor and Penang, regions characterised by cultural and religious diversity and formal pluralism policies. The research subjects include individuals and groups such as religious figures (*imam*, *ustaz*, *pendeta*, and pastors—Muslim and Christian religious leaders), community leaders, members of NGOs focusing on interfaith harmony, the general public engaged in interfaith dialogue, and government officials involved in pluralism policies.

This research employs a qualitative method to explore the social and cultural dynamics that influence interfaith relationships in depth. A comparative case study strategy was adopted to examine the differing socio-political and cultural frameworks of Indonesia and Malaysia (Baba et al., 2023; Subchi et al., 2022). Furthermore, a phenomenological approach was utilised to understand the subjective experiences of individuals in Muslim and Christian communities, providing insights into how religious moderation affects their interpretations and lived experiences (Aziz, 2023). The qualitative method was chosen because quantitative approaches, such as surveys, may fail to capture the nuanced and in-depth experiences required for this study.

The research data were derived from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with religious leaders, community leaders, and government officials, as well as through participation in community activities such as interfaith dialogues and joint celebrations. Secondary data included government policy documents, local media articles, and publications from NGOs to provide additional context. Informants were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, with 20–30 participants per location. Efforts were made to ensure gender balance and representation of urban and rural perspectives, enriching the diversity of the data.

The data collection process employed three primary techniques to ensure completeness and validity. Firstly, in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face or via video calls when necessary. These semi-structured interviews provided flexibility for probing relevant themes. Secondly, participatory observation was conducted by attending various community activities, including interfaith dialogues, joint celebrations, and social events. These observations focused on interactions between Muslim and Christian communities within the context of religious moderation. Field notes captured detailed observations of relationship patterns and social dynamics. Thirdly, focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with 5–10 participants in each group. These discussions involved specific communities, such as youth organisations or interfaith committees, to gather collective perspectives on religious moderation. FGDs enriched the data with diverse viewpoints from different societal groups.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and key themes. The first step involved organising data from interviews, observations, and documents into main topics, such as "religious moderation," "interfaith dialogue," "conflict and resolution," and "government roles." The

data were then coded to highlight specific patterns, such as perceptions of the importance of interfaith dialogue or tensions in specific regions. The coding process led to the extraction of major themes, such as the role of religious leaders in fostering dialogue and the impact of government policies on pluralism.

To enhance data validity, triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. Any discrepancies were clarified with informants to ensure accuracy. Supporting documents, such as government reports and records from interfaith forums, were used to contextualise the findings further. The data management and analysis process was supported by NVivo software, which improved systematic organisation and increased transparency and replicability.

### 3. Results

#### *Religious Moderation: A Comparative Perspective*

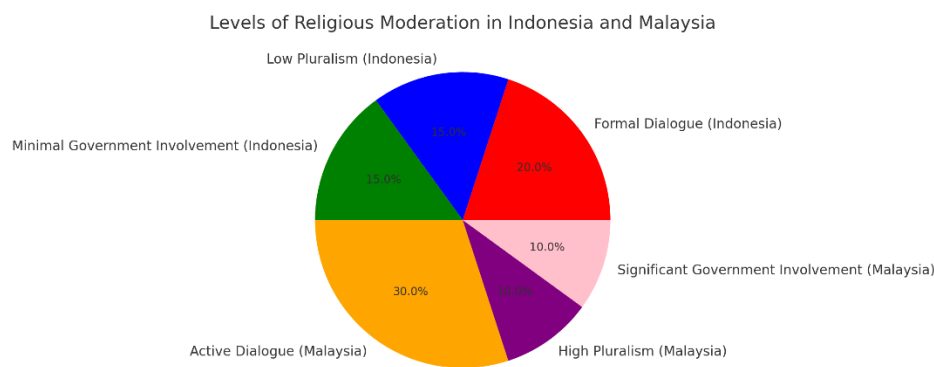
The following are the research results presented in the form of tables and diagrams, accompanied by detailed descriptions for each section. Tables and diagrams encompass the main themes found from qualitative analysis, particularly regarding the influence of religious moderation on the harmony of Muslim and Christian relationships in Indonesia and Malaysia.

**Table 1. Thematic Results Table from Interviews and Observations**

Main Theme	Indonesia	Malaysia
<b>Religious Moderation</b>	Interfaith dialogue is limited to formal events. Resistance to the acceptance of pluralism remains high (Ali, 2016; Rahayu & Bagijo, 2024). Minimal local government involvement in religious moderation.	Interfaith dialogue is conducted more frequently. Pluralism is well-accepted (Isnin et al., 2021; Nur et al., 2019). The government actively promotes moderation.
<b>Interfaith Relations</b>	Relationships are generally good but tend to remain formal. There is suspicion among communities, especially in rural areas.	More harmonious relationships in urban areas. Interfaith cooperation is more active in social activities (Khaerun Rijaal, 2021).
<b>Role of Religious Figures</b>	Religious figures influence the community significantly but are less active in promoting moderation.	Religious figures act as intermediaries facilitating dialogue between Muslim and Christian communities.
<b>Role of the Government</b>	Local governments provide limited support for religious moderation.	Federal and state governments fully support pluralism and interfaith dialogue policies.
<b>Moderation Challenges</b>	Cultural and traditional barriers hinder openness. Internal religious conflicts persist.	Challenges lie more in implementing policies at the local level. Discrimination exists but is addressed better by the government.

Table 1 shows that religious moderation in Indonesia tends to be formal, with high resistance to pluralism and limited involvement from local governments. Conversely, in Malaysia, religious moderation is more dynamic, pluralism is widely accepted, and government support plays a significant role. One respondent in Indonesia stated, *"Interfaith events are more symbolic in nature, lacking sincere dialogue"* (Indonesian Interfaith Activist, Yogyakarta, January 6, 2024). This highlights the need for deeper interfaith dialogue in Indonesia. Meanwhile, a respondent in Malaysia explained, *"The active promotion of pluralism in Malaysia facilitates interfaith dialogue implementation"* (Malaysian Interfaith Activist, Kuala Lumpur, January 24, 2024). This demonstrates the crucial role of government support in fostering interfaith relations.

It shows that strong government support can create a more conducive environment for interfaith interaction. Thus, the differences in approaches to religious moderation between these two countries reflect the significant impact of government support and societal acceptance of pluralism. Similarly, the difference in the role of religious leaders is explained in Table 1, which states that in Indonesia, religious leaders are less actively involved in promoting religious moderation, while in Malaysia, they act as intermediaries facilitating dialogue between Muslim and Christian communities. In addition, the difference in the Role of Government, as in Malaysia, the government plays a more significant role in promoting pluralism and interfaith dialogue, unlike in Indonesia, where its role is still limited to certain local policies. Another difference is that both countries face challenges in implementing religious moderation. However, in Malaysia, the challenges are more related to implementing local policies, while in Indonesia, there are more cultural challenges and internal religious issues.



**Figure 1. The Level of Religious Moderation in Indonesia and Malaysia**

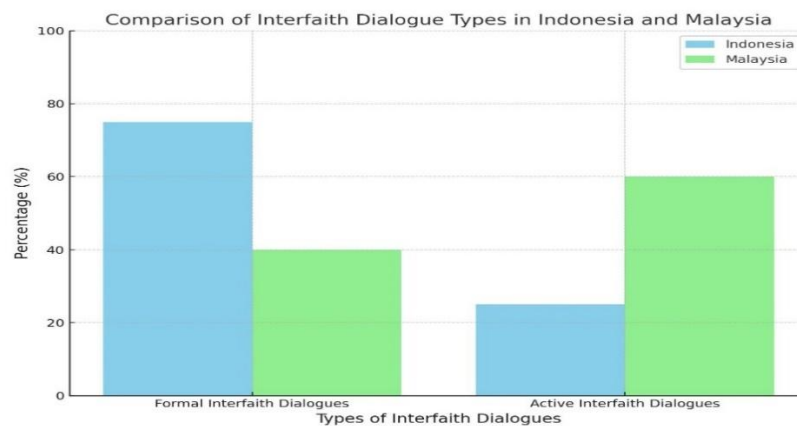
Figure 1 highlights the comparative levels of religious moderation in Indonesia and Malaysia, drawing insights from interviews with 20 interfaith activists in key regions: Yogyakarta, Surabaya, Kuala Lumpur, and Selangor. The findings underscore stark contrasts between the two countries regarding religious moderation, government involvement, and societal acceptance of pluralism.

In Indonesia, 50% of respondents perceive religious moderation as predominantly formal. This formality manifests in interfaith events that are symbolic rather than substantive, often limited to ceremonial occasions without deeper engagement or dialogue. A critical factor contributing to this limitation is the minimal involvement of local governments, which fail to provide consistent support or frameworks to facilitate active religious moderation. Additionally, cultural and traditional barriers reinforce resistance to pluralism, creating a challenging environment for meaningful interfaith collaboration. This *dynamic fosters* a sense of stagnation as efforts remain superficial and disconnected from grassroots realities.

Conversely, Malaysia presents a more dynamic approach to religious moderation. According to 50% of respondents, active religious moderation is a defining characteristic, supported by a higher acceptance of pluralism within society. This openness is further bolstered by robust government initiatives at both the federal and state levels, which actively promote policies and programs that encourage harmony and interfaith cooperation. For instance, the government's commitment to pluralism ensures that interfaith dialogues address practical societal issues and foster collaboration rather than mere formality. This level of engagement creates a conducive environment for sustainable interfaith relations and reflects the broader societal acceptance of diversity.

The comparative analysis suggests that government involvement and societal attitudes toward pluralism are pivotal factors in shaping the nature and success of religious moderation. In Malaysia, strong governmental support acts as a catalyst for active dialogue and acceptance, while in Indonesia, the lack of such support, combined with cultural resistance, limits the effectiveness of moderation efforts. This divergence highlights the need for Indonesia to adopt more proactive measures to

strengthen local governance and address societal resistance to pluralism, aiming to transition from symbolic gestures to meaningful and inclusive practices of religious moderation.



**Figure 2. Types of Interfaith Dialogue**

The figure 2 above shows the comparison of the percentage of interfaith dialogue conducted formally and actively in Indonesia and Malaysia. The results show that in Indonesia, interfaith dialogue tends to be dominated by a formal approach with a percentage of 75%, while active dialogue only reaches 25%. The data was taken from one of the respondents, a leader community in Yogyakarta. *"Most interfaith dialogues here are symbolic and formal, often limited to official events without deeper engagement"* (Muslim Religious Leader 1, Yogyakarta, April 8, 2024). The same evidence comes from one respondent in East Java: *"There is still hesitation to move beyond formalities in interfaith events, especially when discussing pluralism openly"* (Christian religious leader 1, Surabaya, April 5, 2024). This reflects the limitations in creating space for deep and meaningful dialogue between religious communities. On the other hand, Malaysia shows a more balanced pattern, where active dialogue reaches 60%, while formal dialogue is at 40%. This data is supported by the statement of the respondent from Kuala Lumpur *"In Malaysia, interfaith dialogues are actively encouraged, and participants often discuss practical solutions for community issues"* (Kuala Lumpur interfaith Activist 1, Kuala Lumpur, January 13, 2024). An activist from Selangor mentioned a similar statement: *"The government's commitment to pluralism has helped transform interfaith dialogues into active collaborations that strengthen community ties"* (Selangor interfaith activist, Selangor, January 15, 2024). This data indicates that Malaysia has more successfully promoted substantial engagement through interfaith dialogue supported by pluralism policies and active government participation. This diagram clarifies the need for Indonesia to enhance active dialogue to strengthen religious moderation and interfaith relations.

There is still resistance to the acceptance of pluralism in Indonesia. This resistance pattern often manifests itself as intolerance towards religious, ethnic, and cultural differences. For example, some community groups reject the existence of minority communities, which can lead to social conflict and discrimination, like the construction of places of worship in several areas in Indonesia. On the other hand, the Malaysian government strives to ensure that moderation becomes an integral part of national policy. Malaysia strives to build a harmonious society through various initiatives, such as educational programs that emphasize the values of tolerance and respect for diversity. In addition, the government is also active in promoting interfaith dialogue and highlighting the role of community leaders in creating an atmosphere conducive to pluralism. With these measures, Malaysia strives to address the challenges of maintaining social stability and strengthening national cohesion.

Religious moderation in Malaysia demonstrates a more dynamic and impactful approach, driven by strong acceptance of pluralism and comprehensive national policies. In contrast, Indonesia's approach remains formal and constrained, often limited to symbolic gestures without deeper engagement. This stark difference underscores the crucial role of pluralism and government

commitment in fostering meaningful and sustainable interfaith dialogue. In Indonesia, resistance to pluralism remains a significant challenge to religious moderation. This resistance is often rooted in cultural and traditional beliefs that prioritise homogeneity over diversity. For instance, social conflicts related to the rejection of minority worship places in urban areas, such as Jakarta and Yogyakarta, exemplify this resistance. Additionally, the limited involvement of local governments further exacerbates the problem, as there is a lack of structured support for initiatives promoting religious harmony.

Meanwhile, Malaysia has integrated religious moderation into its national agenda through policies that actively promote pluralism. Government initiatives, such as the National Harmony Act and educational programs, emphasise tolerance, respect for diversity, and collaborative interfaith dialogue. These efforts address societal challenges and create a policy framework that ensures the sustainability of religious moderation as a core element of national identity. The findings highlight the pivotal role of pluralism and active government policies in fostering effective religious moderation. Malaysia's success in creating a conducive environment for interfaith dialogue and collaboration can be attributed to its comprehensive approach to pluralism, where government policies serve as both a foundation and catalyst for societal acceptance of diversity.

On the other hand, Indonesia's limited progress in this area suggests that formal events and symbolic gestures are insufficient to address deeper societal challenges. The lack of local government support and cultural resistance to pluralism hinder the potential for meaningful interfaith interactions. These results reinforce the importance of adopting pluralism as a cornerstone of national policies and ensuring that government initiatives actively address societal and cultural barriers to interfaith harmony.

The findings reveal three significant patterns in interfaith relations between Indonesia and Malaysia. First, interfaith relations in Indonesia remain formal and marked by suspicion, particularly in rural areas, where 40% of respondents report distrust toward other religious communities. This suspicion is largely influenced by historical religious-political tensions and socio-economic disparities that create competition over resources. Second, Malaysia demonstrates a more harmonious interfaith environment, with 70% of respondents perceiving positive interfaith relations, especially in urban settings. This suggests that urbanization and government-supported multicultural policies foster greater interfaith collaboration. Third, structured initiatives and social engagement are crucial in bridging interfaith divides, as evidenced by Malaysia's successful implementation of interfaith forums and joint community projects, such as the Interfaith Blood Donation Drive and the Malaysia Interfaith Harmony Week Forum 2023. These initiatives facilitate meaningful interactions and cooperation among religious groups, promoting mutual understanding and trust.

The data highlights the critical role of institutional support and social engagement in shaping interfaith relations. In Indonesia, the persistence of suspicion and formal interfaith interactions underscores the need for targeted interventions, particularly in rural areas. The rejection of church-labelled social aid in disaster relief efforts demonstrates the deep-rooted distrust that continues to hinder collaboration. Addressing this issue requires strategic engagement from religious leaders and grassroots organizations to foster trust through educational initiatives and collaborative programs. Meanwhile, Malaysia's success in promoting interfaith harmony reflects the effectiveness of structured, government-supported initiatives encouraging cross-religious cooperation in addressing social issues. The presence of interfaith forums and humanitarian projects demonstrates that fostering interfaith unity requires a comprehensive and sustained approach that integrates policy frameworks with active community participation. These findings suggest that Indonesia can enhance interfaith relations by adopting a similar model, where structured initiatives, inclusive policies, and community-driven programs create opportunities for meaningful interfaith collaboration and long-term social cohesion.

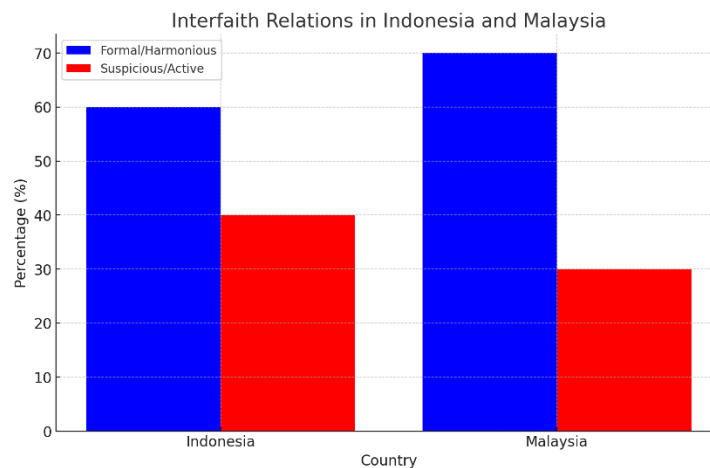
#### *Interfaith Relations: From Suspicion to Cooperation*

The results show that interfaith relations in Indonesia tend to be formal and still coloured by a high level of suspicion, especially in rural areas. One respondent stated, *"In rural Indonesia, interfaith*



relationships are formal with deep-seated suspicion “(Indonesian Interfaith Activist 2, Yogyakarta, January 7, 2024). This suspicion arises due to Indonesia's complex history of religion and politics, which shapes people's perceptions of interfaith relations. Social and economic factors reinforce these suspicions, especially in rural areas, where competition for resources and economic inequality often fuels interfaith conflict. For example, the rejection of church-labelled social assistance in the 2022 Cianjur earthquake disaster is evidence of the strong suspicion of interfaith relations (Khotimah, 2023).

In contrast, in Malaysia, interfaith relations are more harmonious, especially in urban areas, where collaboration on social projects is more active. A Malaysian respondent stated, “Urban communities in Malaysia actively collaborate on social projects” (Malaysian Interfaith Activist 2, Kuala Lumpur, January 12, 2024). Different social and political factors in each country drive this difference. In Malaysia, the multiculturalism policy implemented by the government has created a more inclusive and harmonious environment. In addition, historical and cultural factors also play a role in shaping the dynamics of interfaith relations in both countries.



**Figure 3. Interfaith Relations in Indonesia and Malaysia**

Figure 3 illustrates the differences in interfaith relations between the two countries. In Indonesia, 60% of respondents describe interfaith relations as harmonious, while 40% report a sense of suspicion, particularly in rural areas where historical tensions and socio-economic disparities contribute to mistrust. In contrast, 70% of respondents in Malaysia perceive interfaith relations as harmonious, with 30% highlighting active interfaith interactions, especially in social initiatives. This data suggests that Malaysia's interfaith engagement is more dynamic, likely influenced by structured government-supported multicultural policies and well-established interfaith programs.

The following photos of interfaith social activities in Malaysia can explain how religious communities actively help each other without regard for religious differences and without suspicion of converting followers of other religions.



**Figure 4. Malaysia Interfaith Harmony Week Forum 2023**



**Figure 5. Interfaith Blood Donation Activities in Malaysia 2023**

Figure 4 captures a significant moment from the *Malaysia Interfaith Harmony Week Forum 2023* held in Kuching, Malaysia. The event brought religious leaders, government officials, and community representatives together to promote dialogue and understanding among different faith groups. The presence of religious figures from various backgrounds highlights the commitment to fostering interfaith cooperation and reducing tensions that may arise due to religious differences. This forum is a platform to discuss strategies for enhancing religious harmony and addressing challenges related to interfaith relations in Malaysia.

Figure 5 depicts an *Interfaith Blood Donation Drive* organized by the *Parish Ministry of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Affairs (PMEIA)* in 2023. This initiative is a tangible example of how interfaith collaboration extends beyond dialogue to practical social contributions. The event involved participants from different religious backgrounds working together toward a common humanitarian goal—saving lives through blood donation. Such initiatives help break down religious barriers, foster trust, and strengthen social bonds among diverse communities.

Both figures highlight how Malaysia promotes interfaith unity through structured events and collaborative efforts. These initiatives demonstrate that inclusive programs involving religious leaders and the broader community play a crucial role in building trust and reducing interfaith suspicion, particularly in regions where religious differences might otherwise lead to division. Encouraging similar programs in rural communities can further bridge religious gaps and enhance interfaith cooperation in broader societal contexts.

Interfaith relations in Indonesia are formal and marked by suspicion in rural areas, while Malaysia demonstrates active and harmonious interactions in urban settings. In rural Indonesia, suspicion towards interfaith dialogue stems from a lack of understanding about other religions, historical interfaith tensions, and socio-economic competition over limited resources. For example, resistance to interfaith dialogue often manifests in rejecting church-based aid or places of worship in certain regions. This reflects the deeply rooted mistrust that continues to hinder meaningful collaboration. Additionally, the limited role of local governments and religious institutions in facilitating interfaith education contributes to the persistence of these issues.

To address these challenges, there is a pressing need for educational initiatives that promote mutual understanding and cultural acceptance. Programs that introduce the concept of interfaith dialogue gradually and comprehensively can help ease tensions and enhance relationships among religious communities.

On the other hand, Malaysia provides a contrasting example of how government-supported social collaboration initiatives foster trust and unity among diverse religious groups. Activities such as interfaith forums and joint community projects, supported by policies like the National Unity Blueprint, have significantly contributed to creating harmonious interfaith relations. These initiatives encourage active participation from religious leaders, government officials, and grassroots communities to address shared societal issues, such as poverty alleviation, disaster recovery, and public health crises.

The findings highlight the critical role of sustained interfaith dialogue in addressing suspicion and fostering collaboration. In rural Indonesia, involving trusted local religious leaders who hold influence and credibility within their communities is essential. These leaders can act as bridges between different faith groups, building trust and reducing fear toward interfaith dialogue. For instance, collaborative projects led by religious figures, such as joint disaster relief efforts or community education programs, can serve as starting points to improve interfaith relations.

Malaysia's success underscores the importance of a structured and holistic approach, where government-backed initiatives are combined with grassroots participation. Programs like interfaith forums and blood donation campaigns not only address societal challenges but also create opportunities for genuine interaction and trust-building. These examples illustrate that sustained efforts, involving both institutional support and community-based initiatives, are key to overcoming suspicion and fostering harmonious interfaith cooperation. By adopting such an approach, Indonesia can gradually transform its formal and suspicious interfaith relations into active and meaningful collaborations that benefit society as a whole.

The Impact of Religious Moderation on Interfaith Harmony

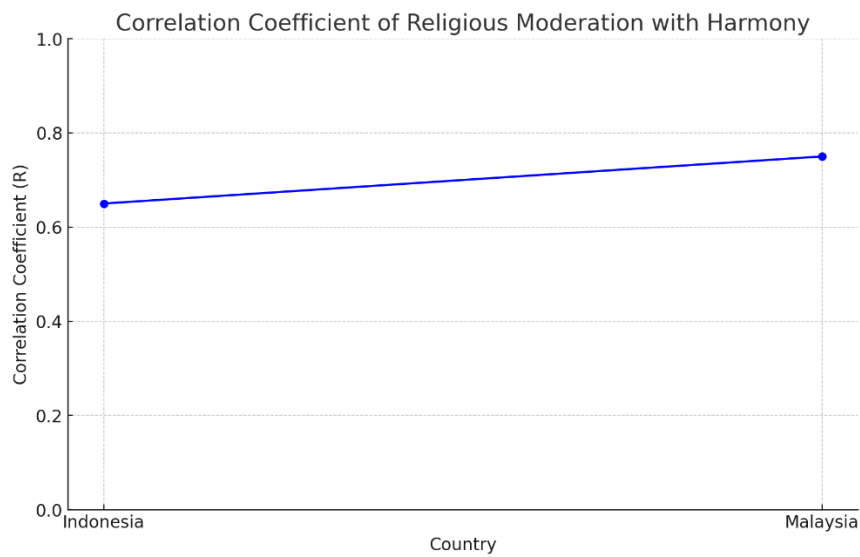


Figure 6. The Influence of Religious Moderation on Harmony in Indonesia and Malaysia

Correlation data indicates that religious moderation significantly influences interfaith harmony, with a correlation value of  $R=0.65$  in Indonesia and  $R=0.72$  in Malaysia. This demonstrates the critical role of religious moderation in fostering harmonious interfaith relationships amidst diversity. As one respondent in Malaysia stated, “Moderation efforts in Malaysia make dialogue easier and more impactful” (Malaysian Interfaith Activists 3, Kuala Lumpur, January 13, 2024). In contrast, a respondent from Indonesia observed, “In Indonesia, moderation still feels constrained by cultural norms” (Indonesia Interfaith Activist 3, Yogyakarta, January 7, 2024). These contrasting perspectives reflect the challenges and successes of religious moderation in each country.

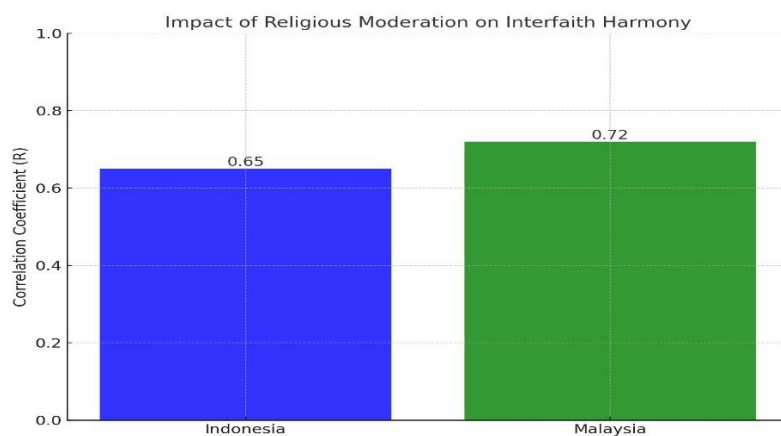


Figure 7. Correlation Graph

To further illustrate the impact of religious moderation on interfaith harmony, a correlation graph is provided below. This visualisation highlights the differences in the strength of the relationship between religious moderation and interfaith harmony in Indonesia and Malaysia. The graph shows  $R=0.65$  in Indonesia, indicating a moderate positive correlation. This suggests that while religious moderation has an influence, its impact is limited by cultural and structural barriers. In Malaysia,  $R=0.72$  represents a stronger positive correlation, attributed to government support and structured interfaith dialogue initiatives.

Religious moderation significantly impacts interfaith harmony, with Malaysia demonstrating stronger effects due to active pluralism and structured dialogue, while Indonesia faces challenges from cultural constraints and limited government support.

The correlation values provide insight into how religious moderation influences interfaith harmony in each country. In Indonesia, with a correlation value of  $R=0.65$ , religious moderation faces challenges in achieving its full potential. This is primarily due to cultural norms that prioritise homogeneity, creating resistance to pluralism. Additionally, a lack of comprehensive policies and limited government involvement hinders the development of meaningful interfaith dialogue. These limitations are especially evident in rural areas, where socio-economic tensions exacerbate mistrust among religious groups. Meanwhile, the stronger correlation value of  $R=0.72$  reflects the success of Malaysia's pluralism policies, such as the *National Unity Blueprint*, which actively supports interfaith dialogue and collaboration. This government-backed approach facilitates trust-building and promotes collaboration through interfaith forums and community-based projects, fostering higher levels of interfaith harmony.

The findings highlight the critical need to adopt comprehensive policies and grassroots initiatives to strengthen the impact of religious moderation on interfaith harmony. In Indonesia, addressing cultural and structural barriers requires targeted interventions. For instance, training programmes for religious leaders, such as the *School of Harmony Program* initiated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, play a vital role in fostering interfaith dialogue at the local level. Additionally, integrating pluralism education into school curricula through *Multicultural-Based Religious Education* can instil values of tolerance and respect from an early age. Establishing platforms like the *Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB)* provides opportunities for meaningful dialogue, enabling collaboration among different religious communities. Furthermore, efforts to counter radicalism, such as digital initiatives like the *Cyber Peace Task Force*, are essential to address divisive narratives and promote peaceful coexistence.

Malaysia's success underscores the importance of sustained government support combined with active community participation in enhancing interfaith harmony. By integrating pluralism policies with grassroots collaboration, Malaysia has created a model that demonstrates the effectiveness of structured and inclusive approaches. These strategies provide valuable insights for Indonesia to overcome its challenges and move towards stronger interfaith harmony by adopting and adapting lessons from Malaysia's experience.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study show significant differences in religious moderation and interreligious relations in Indonesia and Malaysia. In Indonesia, religious moderation is still formal, with limited government involvement, especially in the local context. This causes interreligious relations to be dominated by suspicion, especially in rural areas, where 40% of respondents report distrust of other religious communities. In contrast, Malaysia shows a more harmonious pattern of interaction, with 70% of respondents perceiving interfaith relations as positive and more active in social activities. The main factor distinguishing the two countries is government involvement in promoting pluralism and interfaith dialogue.

In terms of the approach to interfaith dialogue, Indonesia relies more on formal dialogue, with a percentage of 75%, while only 25% involve active dialogue. In contrast, Malaysia is more balanced, with active dialogue reaching 60%, influenced by national policies that encourage pluralism and the government's role in supporting community initiatives. The correlation between religious moderation and interfaith harmony is also higher in Malaysia ( $R=0.72$ ) than in Indonesia ( $R=0.65$ ), suggesting that more inclusive policy structures can strengthen social relations in multireligious societies.

The differences in the results of this study are due to various factors, especially related to the history of the relationship between religion and politics, as well as the level of government involvement in supporting pluralism. In Indonesia, religious moderation still faces major challenges due to deep-rooted social norms and a long history of interreligious tensions (Pangalila & Rumbay, 2024). Interfaith relations in Indonesia tend to be formal and sometimes fraught with suspicion, especially in rural areas

with a history of interfaith conflict. One clear example is the unwillingness of some Indonesian Muslims to wish Christians 'Merry Christmas,' reflecting a cultural norm that rejects symbolic recognition of other religions (Sirry, 2013). The lack of government involvement in building pluralism is also an obstacle to more open dialogue, especially since grassroots initiatives often lack adequate institutional support. As a result, efforts to build interfaith harmony in Indonesia are still limited to ceremonial forums, and there are no systematic efforts to strengthen pluralism as part of national policy.

In contrast, Malaysia exhibits a higher level of religious moderation, which can be attributed to government policies that actively promote pluralism through initiatives such as *1Malaysia* and the *National Unity Blueprint* (Harris & Han, 2020). Strong government support has created a more conducive environment for open and ongoing interfaith dialogue. This policy is also reinforced by community-level efforts, such as interfaith charities, which provide space for meaningful interaction and collaboration between religious groups. With a combination of top-down policy and grassroots initiatives, Malaysia has created a more harmonious model of interfaith relations. This shows that the role of the government in building a strong pluralistic structure is crucial for creating effective and sustainable religious moderation.

This study aligns with prior research that underscores the critical role of government policies, interfaith dialogue, and education in fostering interfaith harmony. Zainal (2015) highlights how Malaysia's pluralism policies have enabled greater acceptance of diversity, contrasting sharply with the challenges documented by Husaini (2006), who noted that Indonesia's interfaith relations have been characterised by suspicion and tension. However, this study contributes a comparative perspective, offering insights into the practical implementation of religious moderation in two socio-political contexts.

In Indonesia, religious moderation is heavily influenced by national policies promoting moderate Islam to combat intolerance and radicalism. Subchi et al. (2022) demonstrate that such policies aim to sustain Indonesia's high religious harmony index. However, the quality of interreligious contact plays a more significant role in reducing negative attitudes, as found by Kanas, Scheepers, and Sterkens (2015). Despite these efforts, cultural and structural challenges remain pervasive. For instance, the worldview of *Abangan* Muslims, as described by Mamahit (2021), highlights a syncretic and tolerant perspective that could enhance interfaith relations but remains underutilised.

In Malaysia, the role of government policies and frameworks for tolerance is more prominent. Walters (2007) explores how state-mobilised Islamisation has impacted non-Muslim minorities, including Christians, thereby necessitating robust interfaith dialogue and educational initiatives. Abdul Rahman and Shapie (2023) further develop a conceptual framework for religious tolerance, emphasising respect, forgiveness, and interreligious goodwill. These initiatives contribute to a more inclusive societal fabric, as evidenced by collaborative efforts between religious communities.

The findings underscore the critical role of pluralism and institutional support in enhancing interfaith harmony. In Indonesia, the formality and limited scope of interfaith dialogues hinder their effectiveness in addressing societal tensions. Without addressing these cultural and structural barriers, fostering a truly inclusive and harmonious environment will be challenging. In Malaysia, the integration of religious moderation into national policy illustrates how a structured and proactive approach can strengthen interfaith relations, reduce extremism, and build a cohesive society.

The positive implication of religious moderation in both countries is its potential to bridge divides and foster collaboration among religious communities. However, the lack of progress in Indonesia raises concerns about the persistence of cultural resistance and the minimal involvement of local governments. In Malaysia, while the government's role is commendable, challenges in implementing policies at the local level, such as in rural areas, highlight the need for more inclusive and decentralised approaches.

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made. In Indonesia, efforts should focus on increasing local government involvement in supporting interfaith initiatives, promoting pluralism education through schools, and empowering religious leaders to act as agents of moderation. Programs such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs' School of Harmony could be expanded to rural areas, and

digital campaigns targeting younger generations could be employed to counter radicalism and promote tolerance. In Malaysia, maintaining and expanding current policies while addressing local-level implementation challenges will be critical to sustaining progress. Strengthening grassroots efforts and providing additional resources for community-led initiatives can further enhance interfaith harmony.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has highlighted the significant role of religious moderation in shaping interfaith relations in Indonesia and Malaysia. The findings reveal that while both countries employ religious moderation as a strategy to foster social harmony, their approaches differ significantly due to variations in state involvement, societal acceptance of pluralism, and the implementation of interfaith dialogue. In Indonesia, religious moderation remains largely formal and faces cultural resistance, particularly in rural areas, whereas Malaysia demonstrates a more active and structured approach, supported by strong government policies that promote pluralism and interfaith cooperation. These differences underscore the crucial role of government initiatives and grassroots participation in enhancing religious harmony.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its comparative analysis of religious moderation in Indonesia and Malaysia. Previous studies have largely focused on either qualitative descriptions or case studies within one country. By integrating a cross-national perspective, this study provides empirical insights into how state policies and community engagement influence interfaith relations in diverse socio-political contexts. Furthermore, this research contributes to the field by emphasizing the necessity of quantitative analysis in evaluating the effectiveness of religious moderation policies. The study demonstrates that strong institutional support and inclusive policies significantly enhance the effectiveness of interfaith initiatives, thereby promoting a more cohesive society.

Despite its contributions, this research has several limitations. Firstly, while the study employs a qualitative comparative approach, further research incorporating quantitative methods, such as large-scale surveys or statistical modelling, would enhance the robustness of the findings. Secondly, the study primarily focuses on Muslim-Christian relations, overlooking interactions with other religious groups that could provide a more comprehensive picture of interfaith dynamics. Thirdly, the research does not extensively explore the impact of digital platforms on interfaith dialogue, an area that is becoming increasingly relevant in contemporary religious discourse. Future studies should address these gaps by broadening the scope of interfaith analysis, integrating digital media perspectives, and employing mixed-methods approaches to deepen the understanding of religious moderation in multicultural societies.

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