**Policy Translation and Religious Moderation under Aceh’s Sharia Governance: The Banda Aceh Interfaith Forum**

**Abstract**

This article examines how the Banda Aceh Interfaith Forum (FKUB) translates Indonesia’s national policy of religious moderation into practice under Aceh’s sharia governance. Using a qualitative case study, the research draws on in-depth interviews with forum members, religious leaders, and local officials, complemented by document analysis of forum recommendations and relevant local regulations. Data were coded through thematic analysis to trace how national guidelines are localized, negotiated, and enacted in routine mediation and advisory work. The study finds that FKUB operates as a practical policy translator—aligning national goals with local norms by framing moderation in culturally resonant terms, facilitating intergroup contact, and advising authorities on sensitive issues such as house-of-worship permits and community outreach. These efforts are constrained by a limited legal mandate, uneven resources, and public expectations in a sharia-governed setting. The article contributes an empirically grounded account of policy translation in a hybrid legal context and clarifies the link between religious moderation and local governance outcomes. Practical implications include clarifying FKUB’s mandate, strengthening documentation and follow-up mechanisms, and adopting measurable indicators of community trust and conflict prevention. The findings speak to scholars and policymakers concerned with interfaith relations, legal pluralism, and the localization of national reform agendas.

**Keywords:** *policy translation; religious moderation; sharia governance; Aceh; Interfaith Forum (FKUB)*

**Introduction**

Religious and ideological diversity is an inevitable global social reality, carrying an inherent duality: on the one hand, it offers a rich source of cultural heritage and interfaith understanding; on the other hand, it also serves as fertile ground for friction, misunderstanding, and even open conflict often waged in the name of religion (Hedges, 2020; Nendissa et al., 2024; Priyono, 2016). The potential for conflict can be understood through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which highlights how strong group-based religious identities, when not inclusively managed, can lead to prejudice and intergroup discrimination (Islam, 2014). This dynamic is evident in recurring patterns of religiously motivated intolerance, discrimination, and violent extremism—issues that continue to draw serious attention from the global community. International reports consistently underline how these issues erode social cohesion, particularly in multicultural regions such as Southeast Asia (Ahmed et al., 2022; Amran, 2022; Skeie, 2023).

As a response to these global challenges, many nations have sought to formulate and implement strategic approaches to fostering tolerance, cultivating meaningful interfaith dialogue, and pursuing sustainable peace grounded in social justice (Budiman et al., 2022; Taufiq et al., 2024). Within this context, Indonesia as home to the world’s largest Muslim population and constitutionally recognized religious pluralism faces an especially complex challenge in managing religious diversity. While the ideal of “unity in diversity” is enshrined in the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, both historical and contemporary realities reveal gaps between this ideal and lived experience. Interreligious relations remain fraught with tensions fueled by political, social, and economic factors (Rosidah, 2020; Sambo, 2023), as reflected in ongoing reports of religious intolerance documented by several monitoring institutions, such as the Wahid Foundation (2023) and Setara Institute’s Religious Freedom Report (Setara Institut, 2023). These conditions underscore the urgent need for a more systematic and in-depth strategy for managing diversity—one that goes beyond formal inter-elite harmony and emphasizes the grassroots internalization of values such as pluralism and intercultural understanding (Friday & Friday, 2003; Syed & Ozbilgin, 2019; Yadav & Lenka, 2020).

To address this need, the Indonesian government launched a national policy on “Religious Moderation,” emphasizing a balanced, just, and tolerant approach to religious practice (*tasamuh*) and firmly rejecting all forms of extremism and violence (Jubba et al., 2022; Kementerian Agama RI, 2019a, 2019b). Core values such as balance (*tawazun*), justice (*i’tidal*), and deliberation (*syura*) not only reflect the essence of many religious teachings in Indonesia but also resonate with the foundational values of Pancasila (Arif, 2020; Ashadi et al., 2024; Islamy, 2022; Muslim, 2022; Setinawati et al., 2025). Theoretically, this policy can be interpreted through the lens of Conflict Transformation Theory, which underscores the importance of integrating local cultural values into sustainable peacebuilding processes. As part of this policy’s local implementation, the government established the Interfaith Harmony Forum (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*, FKUB) at the provincial and municipal/regency levels (Aditya & Mayasari, 2022; Betty Tresnawaty et al., 2025). This body was formed under the Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs No. 9 and 8 of 2006, which outlines guidelines for interfaith dialogue, recommendations for establishing places of worship, and community empowerment in maintaining social harmony (Asnawati, 2012; Humas, 2020; Ichwanuddin & Widyaningrum, 2021).

A growing body of studies has acknowledged FKUB’s positive role in mediating religious conflicts, although consistent challenges remain, including resource limitations and the risk of political co-optation (Huliselan, 2020; Humaizi et al., 2024; Manshuruddin, 2017; Sahrul & Fadhila Daulai, 2019), Within this landscape, the province of Aceh presents a unique and significant case. It is the only region in Indonesia that formally implements aspects of Islamic Sharia under Law No. 11 of 2006 on Aceh Governance (Huda, 2020; Isa, 2014). As a result, Aceh operates under a distinct legal and social framework, which directly shapes how religious moderation is understood and practiced. Previous studies have consistently highlighted the structural and operational challenges faced by FKUB in various regions, including limited operational budgets, political interference that undermines institutional independence and controversies surrounding recommendations for places of worship—an issue frequently triggering communal friction (AR et al., 2021; Kamaliah et al., 2024; Nasution et al., 2024; Ritonga et al., 2023; Sofjan, 2016; Sopyan et al., 2021). Additionally, FKUBs often struggle to reach and gain trust from grassroots communities in multicultural areas, resulting in limited on-the-ground impact (Ahmad et al., 2023; Faqih, 2021; Muwahidah, 2008; Sihombing et al., 2023). On the other hand, FKUB is also widely recognized for its efforts to establish sustained interfaith dialogue platforms and strengthen communication channels across groups (Budiman et al., 2022; Muhammad, n.d., 2022), and has, in some cases, successfully mediated low-scale communal tensions (Putra et al., 2023; Ridwan & Khotimah, 2024; Sulvinajayanti et al., 2024; Sutamaji & Hakim, 2024; Wikanda et al., 2020).

Despite growing attention to religious moderation in Indonesia, particularly in Java and other pluralistic provinces, there remains a significant lack of empirical studies that explore how the national policy of moderation is interpreted and operationalized in the unique legal and socio-religious setting of Aceh. Specifically, little is known about how FKUB actors in Banda Aceh reconcile the national moderation agenda with the local implementation of Islamic Sharia. Such complexity is not merely theoretical but reflected in recurring tensions surrounding religious pluralism in this region. One prominent example occurred in Singkil Regency in 2015, when violence broke out over disputes involving unregistered churches: a church was set on fire by a mob, one person was killed, and approximately 1,900 Christian residents fled to North Sumatra. In Banda Aceh, minority religious groups such as Christians and Buddhists have experienced resistance and prolonged delays in acquiring permits to establish houses of worship, particularly when operating in rented shophouses without formal registration (Tobroni, 2021; U.S. Embassy Jakarta, 2021). In 2012, nine churches in Banda Aceh agreed to halt activities after negotiations with the city government due to lack of permits (Kompas.com, 2012; The Jakarta Post, 2012). FKUB is frequently placed in a delicate position—tasked with implementing the 2006 Joint Ministerial Regulation, while navigating strong public sentiments shaped by local interpretations of Islamic norms. Additionally, broader studies have noted persistent structural limitations on religious minorities’ freedom of worship and celebration in Aceh, particularly through local regulations and communal pressures (Foundation, 2023). Although these tensions may not always escalate into open conflict, they reflect structural disharmony rooted in contested interpretations of religious rights, public pressure, and identity-based exclusion. These empirical realities suggest that religious moderation in Aceh is not simply a matter of policy articulation but involves complex negotiations at the intersection of law, religion, and society. They also highlight the pressing need to investigate how institutions like FKUB navigate and adapt the national religious moderation framework within such a stringent normative environment.

Given Aceh’s unique position as the only province in Indonesia governed by formal Islamic Sharia, Banda Aceh offers a critical context for examining how national religious moderation policies are adapted and negotiated locally. Rather than seeking representativeness across regions, this study adopts an in-depth, context-sensitive approach, focusing on how religious moderation unfolds within a stringent socio-religious framework. Insights from such an extreme case are valuable for understanding the operational boundaries and adaptive strategies of interfaith institutions in varied normative settings. Thus, this study addresses that gap by focusing on the Banda Aceh FKUB as a site of interfaith praxis within the framework of Sharia. It addresses two key research questions: (1) How does the Banda Aceh FKUB articulate the concept of religious moderation within the framework of Islamic Sharia? and (2) How does it facilitate dialogue, mediation, and interreligious harmony within a complex socio-religious setting? Through a context-sensitive and data-driven analysis, this article aims to contribute theoretically to the study of religious moderation policy localization, while offering practical implications for strengthening FKUB’s institutional capacity in socially and normatively complex regions such as Aceh.

**Method**

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design, selecting the Interfaith Harmony Forum *(Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama, FKUB)* of Banda Aceh as a critical case to explore the localization of religious moderation within a Sharia-governed socio-religious environment. The selection of Banda Aceh follows an extreme case rationale, aiming to investigate how religious moderation efforts are interpreted and operationalized within one of the most normatively rigid regions in Indonesia. This approach aligns with Flyvbjerg’s (2006) and Yin’s (2018) argument that extreme or critical cases are particularly valuable for gaining deep insights into complex social phenomena and for maximizing theoretical learning from unique contexts. By focusing on such a setting, the study allows for a deep analytical understanding of the interplay between formal religious governance and the practices of interfaith institutions within a localized environment.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven key informants, comprising active FKUB administrators and representatives from various religious communities who were directly involved in FKUB activities or possessed a strong understanding of religious moderation issues. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria such as experience, reflective capacity, and their involvement in interfaith harmony efforts. This technique is commonly used in qualitative research because it allows for the collection of rich and relevant data (Neuman, 2014; Sugiyono, 2020). In addition to primary data from interviews, this research also utilized secondary documents for triangulation and contextual reinforcement. These documents included FKUB activity reports, meeting minutes, outreach materials, government regulations such as the Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs and Minister of Home Affairs No. 9 and 8 of 2006, the Law on Aceh Governance, and supporting documents from the local government. The use of documents aimed to provide corroborative evidence for field findings and to clarify institutional policy dynamics.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques as developed by Braun and Clarke (2019) The analytical steps involved: (1) familiarizing with the data through repeated reading, (2) initial coding of significant data segments, (3) theme development based on code clusters, (4) reviewing and refining themes, and (5) naming and interpreting the main themes. This method is appropriate for studies that aim to identify patterns of meaning within qualitative narratives and provides interpretive space for understanding informants’ lived experiences (John W. Creswell & Vicki L. Plano Clark, 2018).

**Finding and Discussion**

**Conceptualizing Religious Moderation According to the Banda Aceh FKUB**

The findings reveal that the Banda Aceh FKUB interprets and articulates religious moderation as an approach rooted in the national framework promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but recontextualized according to Aceh’s distinctive socio-religious setting. In general, moderation is understood as a balanced and wise religious attitude—one that avoids excess, embraces the middle path, and upholds wisdom (*hikmah*) in both religious life and social interaction. This understanding reflects several interconnected core principles, summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1.

 Core Principles of Religious Moderation According to the Banda Aceh FKUB

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| Core Principle | Key Interpretation (Based on Research Findings) |
| *Tawassuth* | The middle path; avoiding extremism, either excessive religious zeal (*ifrath*) or neglect and disregard (*tafrith*). |
| *Tasamuh* | Tolerance; recognizing and respecting the presence and rights of others with different beliefs, as a key to interfaith harmony. |
| *Tawazun* | Balance; maintaining harmony between the vertical dimension (*hablumminallah*) and the horizontal (*hablumminannas*), as well as between reason (*‘aqli*) and revelation (*naqli*). |
| *I’tidal* | Justice and proportionality; standing firmly and fairly on truth and treating all parties justly in response to differences. |
| *Musawah* | Equality; viewing all citizens as equal creations of God, with equal rights before the law and within society. |

*Source: Processed from field data, 2024*

Furthermore, the informants—especially FKUB administrators—emphasized that these values are not seen as isolated concepts, but as an integrated religious and civic disposition. *Tasamuh* (tolerance), for instance, is identified as a crucial foundation. The Chairperson of the Banda Aceh FKUB explained that tolerance is the key to religious moderation and that people must be able to accept differences and respect others’ rights to worship according to their beliefs (Interview, Chairperson of Banda Aceh FKUB, March 2024). This understanding also affirms that moderation does not mean compromising one’s faith, but rather the ability to coexist peacefully and respectfully. The Deputy Chair added that moderation is not about being weak or indecisive, but about being fair (*i’tidal*), balanced (*tawazun*), and tolerant (*tasamuh*) when engaging with differences, holding firmly to religious principles while remaining flexible in social interaction (Interview, Deputy Chair of FKUB, March 2024).

FKUB also links these principles to the Islamic value of *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*. Moderation is not regarded as a foreign or secular concept but rather as an embodiment of Islam as a mercy to all creation—preserving both harmony and humanity. In Aceh’s context, emphasis on social harmony and balancing Sharia with human dignity is particularly strong. Moreover, the inclusion of non-Muslim members within the FKUB reinforces interfaith understanding of the concept. As noted by Willy Putra Nanda, a Buddhist representative in FKUB:

“Religious moderation provides guidance for religious leaders... to understand moderation in substance, not as an attempt to reform religion. Here, each religious leader strengthens their own values before conveying them to the wider community.” (Interview, April 2024)

Moderation is also viewed as part of strengthening national identity. FKUB leaders consistently express that moderation supports the values of Pancasila and a just and peaceful civic life. This is reflected in how they link moderation to commitments to the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), the Constitution, and pluralism. As one religious instructor working with FKUB explained:

“As religious instructors, we must explain that this is how my religion teaches—not to unify beliefs, but to explain the values that one holds.”( Interview, Religious Instructor, April 2024)

This perspective is succinctly summarized by the FKUB Chair:

“Moderation doesn’t mean sacrificing one’s beliefs, but rather living side by side peacefully and wisely—respecting others and finding common ground without erasing differences.”( Interview, Chairperson of Banda Aceh FKUB, March 2024)

The concept of religious moderation developed by the Banda Aceh FKUB reflects a careful adaptation process that aligns with Aceh’s local identity, marked by strong Islamic values, a post-conflict legacy, and a dynamic social context—making it both relevant and inclusive, while remaining grounded in local wisdom.

**Implementation of Religious Moderation Values by the Banda Aceh FKUB**

The findings indicate that the Banda Aceh FKUB translates the concept of religious moderation into a variety of strategies, programs, and concrete activities. These are implemented in accordance with FKUB’s core mandates, particularly its role in promoting interreligious harmony. Based on interview data and official documentation, the implementation activities can be grouped into several main categories, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.

Main Categories of Religious Moderation Implementation Activities by the Banda Aceh FKUB

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| --- | --- |
| Activity Category | Description / Key Examples (Based on Research Data) |
| Dialogue and Deliberation | Regular or ad hoc interfaith meetings, thematic discussions, and outreach visits to other religious communities to foster mutual understanding. |
| Public Outreach and Education | Conducting awareness campaigns, seminars, workshops, and public discussions with government institutions, community leaders, youth, and students on religious moderation, harmony, and the 2006 Joint Regulation (PBM No. 9 & 8). |
| Mediation, Advocacy, and Recommendations | Acting as a mediator in cases of potential conflict or misunderstanding, providing input to local authorities, and issuing recommendations for the establishment of houses of worship. |
| Interfaith Collaboration | Initiating or participating in joint interreligious activities such as community service, national holiday celebrations, or collective responses to natural disasters. |

*Source: Processed from field data, 2024*

Among these, dialogue and deliberation are identified as the central strategies in FKUB Banda Aceh’s approach to religious moderation. These forums are regarded as the primary space for building communication, reducing prejudice, and finding common ground among diverse religious communities. The FKUB Chair emphasized that dialogue is the heart of FKUB, as it enables members to get to know one another, reduce suspicion, and find shared solutions through regular meetings, both formal and informal. This sentiment was echoed by a Christian religious leader, who highlighted the importance of FKUB meetings—even informal gatherings over coffee—as meaningful spaces for discussing harmony.

Interestingly, this approach extends beyond official forums and utilizes Aceh’s distinctive social spaces, such as *warung kopi* (coffee stalls/shop), for informal interfaith dialogues. One FKUB member explained that these coffee shops serve as places where religious leaders engage in discussions to address suspicions, dismantle stigmas, and foster trust.

“FKUB uses coffee shops as informal spaces to engage in dialogue with religious leaders—discussing suspicions, breaking down stigmas, and building trust.” (Interview, FKUB Member, April 2024)

Outreach and education efforts also constitute a significant portion of FKUB’s programmatic work. The forum actively disseminates information and promotes understanding about the importance of religious moderation and interfaith harmony across various societal layers. Target audiences include government officials, traditional leaders, civil society figures, youth organizations, and students in Banda Aceh. A range of methods is employed—from seminars and workshops to public discussions addressing current issues surrounding interfaith relations and regulatory frameworks such as the 2006 Joint Regulation. One informant explained that FKUB encourages equal participation among members from all represented religions, where each representative takes turns sharing about their own faith tradition.

“Each FKUB member is given an equal opportunity to speak, and they take turns—for example, the representative of the Christian community explains about Christianity, and others do the same for their faiths.”( Interview, FKUB Member, April 2024)

In its institutional capacity, FKUB Banda Aceh also undertakes mediation and advocacy functions, though these efforts face particular challenges. The forum strives to serve as an impartial mediator during interreligious disputes or misunderstandings. Additionally, it provides recommendations to local authorities on policies affecting religious harmony. One of its most concrete and sensitive tasks is issuing official recommendations for the establishment of houses of worship.

“Every recommendation for a house of worship results from consensus-based deliberation within the FKUB and is documented in writing.”(Interview, FKUB Secretary, April 2024)

Finally, the FKUB implements moderation values through tangible interfaith cooperation. It initiates or supports joint activities that bring together followers of different religions—such as collaborative community service projects, inclusive celebrations of national holidays, and joint disaster relief efforts. According to one member, these activities are seen as effective demonstrations of interfaith solidarity. Moreover, the FKUB utilizes mass media platforms such as Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) to broadcast messages of religious moderation to a broader and more diverse audience.

**Opportunities and Challenges in the Implementation of Religious Moderation by the Banda Aceh FKUB**

In fulfilling its mandate to implement the values of religious moderation, the Banda Aceh FKUB encounters a range of enabling factors (opportunities) as well as notable obstacles (challenges). The research identifies several key opportunities and challenges as perceived by informants and reflected in supporting documents. A summary of these factors is presented in Table 3.

Table 3.
 Key Opportunities and Challenges in the Implementation of Religious Moderation by the Banda Aceh FKUB

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| --- | --- |
| Category | Key Factors (Based on Research Findings) |
| Opportunities | * Government support (both central and local), including legitimacy and funding (albeit limited)
* Strong commitment from religious and traditional leaders involved in FKUB
* Clear regulatory framework (Joint Regulation No. 9 & 8 of 2006) as the basis for FKUB’s work– Relatively stable post-conflict security conditions in the region
 |
| Challenges | * Limited operational funding for optimal program implementation
* Divergent public perceptions and misunderstandings about the concept of religious moderation
* Resistance from exclusive/conservative religious groups
* Potential interference from external parties with particular interests
* Complexity and sensitivity in issuing recommendations for houses of worship
* Limited program reaches and difficulty in engaging all societal layers
* FKUB’s limited mandate, which is more facilitative and advisory rather than executive in nature
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*Source: Processed from field data, 2024*

Regarding opportunities, government support—both from the Ministry of Religious Affairs at the national level and from the Banda Aceh municipal government through the Agency for National Unity and Politics (Kesbangpol)—is acknowledged as a crucial factor enabling FKUB to carry out its programs. This support includes institutional legitimacy as well as financial assistance. Although the funding is modest, it provides a basic operational platform. One FKUB member described that each year, the forum receives operational support through the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ budget allocation, amounting to IDR 60 million, and that they once received additional funding for office construction totaling IDR 50 million.

“Each year, the FKUB receives operational support through the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ budget allocation, amounting to IDR 60 million. In addition, we once received funding from the Ministry for office construction totaling IDR 50 million.” (Interview, FKUB Member, March 2024)

Aside from government backing, the strong commitment of religious and traditional leaders is recognized as an internal strength supporting FKUB’s continuity. These figures often serve as key relational actors within their respective communities, thus playing a vital role in extending the influence of moderation values to broader society. Another contributing factor is the presence of a clear regulatory framework—specifically, the 2006 Joint Regulation—which provides a legal foundation for FKUB’s institutional functions. The relatively stable security situation in Banda Aceh since the post-conflict period also serves as an important prerequisite for interfaith engagement.

On the other hand, the FKUB also faces considerable challenges. Limited operational funding remains a persistent constraint, affecting the quantity, quality, and outreach of its programs. Furthermore, since most FKUB members serve on a voluntary basis, not all are able to participate actively. Another significant challenge stems from the public’s diverse understandings—and sometimes misperceptions—of religious moderation. Some groups perceive it as a compromise on theological principles or as a Western-influenced agenda, which results in resistance or skepticism toward FKUB’s initiatives. This rejection is especially pronounced among groups with exclusive or conservative religious orientations. Moreover, the reach of FKUB’s programs is still considered limited, having yet to fully penetrate grassroots communities. This lack of broad engagement poses an obstacle in cultivating a collective understanding of the value and urgency of moderation.

One of the most sensitive challenges lies in issuing recommendations for houses of worship—a task fraught with socio-political tension and overlapping interests. Nevertheless, the FKUB adheres to the principle of consensus in handling such matters. As emphasized by an FKUB officer:

“Every recommendation for a house of worship is based on consensus within the FKUB and formally issued in writing.”( Interview, FKUB Secretary, April 2024)

Another challenge, implicitly mentioned in several interviews, is the potential for external interference—such as from politically affiliated groups or other actors with vested interests—that could undermine FKUB’s independence. As a non-structural body, FKUB also faces institutional limitations, as its role is primarily facilitative and advisory rather than executive, meaning that its success often depends on local government support and the responsiveness of other institutions.

**Discussion**

The Banda Aceh FKUB’s conceptualization of religious moderation—articulated through the principles of *Tawassuth*, *Tasamuh*, *Tawazun*, *I’tidal*, and *Musawah*—clearly echoes the official narrative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the broader discourse on *Wasathiyah Islam*. However, based on field data, these five principles are not merely reproduced but are reinterpreted in light of Aceh’s unique socio-religious context. This indicates that policy implementation is not a mechanical process, but rather a dynamic one that adapts to local social and cultural realities. From the perspective of *street-level bureaucracy* theory and *policy translation* theory (Czarniawska, 1997; Drori, 2016), this phenomenon can be viewed as a form of policy “translation” by local implementers. In this sense, the FKUB functions not only as an extension of national policy but also as a mediator that reframes moderation messages to resonate with Aceh’s dominant values. This reflects broader global patterns where local religious actors reinterpret state-promoted religious norms to negotiate legitimacy in their specific socio-political contexts (Bagir et al., 2020; Fasya et al., 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2022).

The use of classical Islamic terminology—and more importantly, the framing of moderation as something intrinsic and compatible with Sharia (as *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*, or a mercy to all creation)—can be seen as a key strategy in this process of translation. It is a discursive effort to gain local legitimacy and counter potential resistance that might view moderation as a threat to Aceh’s strong Islamic identity. Nevertheless, the depth of this synthesis deserves further scrutiny. There remains a question as to whether this framing of moderation can fully resolve tensions between the universal principle of *Musawah* (equality) and certain interpretations or implementations of Sharia that may be perceived differently by minority groups. For instance, some studies showed that the integration of Sharia law into Aceh's legal framework has led to tensions with human rights principles, particularly concerning non-Muslim communities (Ulum et al., 2024). Other research highlighted controversies surrounding the legislative process, indicating that the implementation of Qanun often has uneven impacts across societal segments (Solehudin & Ahyani, 2024). Additionally, findings on the constitutionality of Islamic law underscore the persistent need for equitable mechanisms to ensure fairness for all citizens, including minorities (Adhani, 2019). This condition points to the need to critically assess whether the current framing strategy is sufficient to achieve substantive equality.

Moreover, recent studies on the politics of religious moderation in Indonesia highlight how the concept of moderation itself has become a contested space of meaning and political interest (Hakim et al., 2023; Jati & Bachtiar, 2024). In this regard, the Banda Aceh FKUB’s position—aligned with national narratives yet adapted to local norms—reflects the dual institutional role it plays as both a state-affiliated body and a local actor. This positioning may limit the FKUB’s critical capacity when compared to more independent civil society actors. The transition from national discourse to local adaptation illustrates not only the challenges of contextualizing policy but also the lack of space for free deliberation—suggesting a need for deeper and more context-sensitive adaptation strategies. When compared to other Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia, FKUB faces similar tensions in balancing moderate narratives with conservative pressures and minority rights. For instance, Muhamad Ali (2016) in his studieshighlights how "Islam Hadhari" was promoted as a progressive approach to Islam but encountered significant challenges in reconciling modernization aspirations with entrenched religious traditions. Similarly, Ratna Roshida Abd Razak et al., (2010) emphasize the societal reactions and ambiguities surrounding its implementation, reflecting broader struggles in achieving inclusivity. These examples underscore the need for FKUB’s moderation strategies to remain sensitive to local identity while aligning with broader national policy frameworks.

At the level of implementation, the finding that elite-level religious dialogue serves as the “heart” of FKUB’s efforts (as described by the Chairperson) deserves closer analysis. While dialogue is a standard peacebuilding strategy, its effectiveness often hinges on the quality of interaction. According to intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), ideal outcomes require equal status, shared goals, active cooperation, and institutional support. In this light, one might ask whether informal interactions such as “sitting together over coffee” are sufficient to address core issues—such as tensions around places of worship—or whether they merely result in symbolic, surface-level engagement. This highlights the need for a more critical evaluation of the quality and impact of the dialogues conducted.

The limited reach of FKUB’s outreach programs to grassroots communities, as acknowledged in the findings, can be further examined through the lens of social identity theory. The tendency to prioritize in-group identity can hinder the reception of messages from institutions perceived as “outsiders”(Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In a society where religious identity is strong, “moderate” messaging from a government-affiliated body like FKUB may be subject to in-group/out-group bias, making it harder for such messages to be accepted by groups who feel their identity is being challenged. Although joint interfaith social activities are reported to be effective as “concrete examples,” questions remain as to whether these initiatives are capable of fundamentally transforming rigid social identities—or merely generating brief moments of positive contact. This persistent disconnect between programmatic ideals and measurable outcomes remains a critical challenge in assessing the actual effectiveness of FKUB’s outreach.

One of the most critical limitations in implementation is FKUB Banda Aceh’s constrained capacity to mediate and provide recommendations for the establishment of houses of worship. This issue frequently becomes a flashpoint where majority-minority power dynamics, social pressure, and political interests converge—far beyond what dialogue alone can resolve. The analysis of opportunities and challenges further underscores the precarious position of the Banda Aceh FKUB. Through the lens of resource dependency theory (Reitz et al., 1979), we can understand how reliance on government support—both financial and institutional—acts as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, such support enables program implementation; on the other, fluctuations in funding or shifts in political priorities can quickly undermine the institution’s autonomy. This dependency inherently limits FKUB’s ability to critique discriminatory policies or challenge dominant local groups with political influence.

Additionally, the resistance from conservative or exclusive groups should not be seen merely as “misunderstanding.” From a political sociology perspective, this resistance reflects broader ideological contestation over religious authority and the future of Aceh’s post-conflict society under Sharia-based system. Research on Islamic conservatism in Indonesia highlights how conservative religious movements actively seek to preserve traditional narratives amidst ongoing modernization (Makruf & Jahroni, 2024; Yahya & Susilo, 2024). These groups may perceive FKUB’s moderation discourse as a threat to their vision of Islamic order. With limited resources and authority, FKUB struggles to counter these narratives and their public mobilization. This condition reflects a broader challenge faced by quasi-governmental or civil society organizations working on sensitive issues in Indonesia—where space for promoting pluralism is narrowing due to political and social pressures.

Thus, this study illustrates that the Banda Aceh FKUB operates in a constant state of negotiation—between national mandates and local religious norms, between institutional idealism and structural limitations, and between dialogical aspirations and ideological resistance. Amri et al., (2024) argue that religious moderation is inherently intricate, a complexity that finds resonance in the stance adopted by the state and everyday civil practice. The contention here is that the multifaceted nature of religious moderation is not confined to theoretical discourse; it reverberates through the policies enacted by the state and is interwoven with the actions and routines of individuals within the society. Similarly, the forum’s adaptive conceptualization of moderation reflects one dimension of this negotiation. The implementation of elite-focused programs with limited grassroots reach also indicates that FKUB may be choosing the “most feasible” strategies within the constraints of its environment. This analysis highlights that the effectiveness of institutions like FKUB cannot be measured solely by their formal programs but must be understood within the broader interaction between structure (regulations, resources, political context), agency (FKUB actors’ interpretations and strategies), and culture (dominant values, social resistance) in the area where they operate. By unpacking these layered practices of interreligious harmony, this study aims to make a meaningful contribution to understanding the dynamics of religious moderation policy implementation in Indonesia.

**Conclusion**

This study argues that the FKUB of Banda Aceh does not merely implement religious moderation as prescribed by national policy, but actively reinterprets it to navigate the complexities of Aceh’s post-conflict, Sharia-based legal system. Through a process of local adaptation, FKUB strategically frames core principles—*Tawassuth*, *Tasamuh*, *Tawazun*, *I’tidal*, and *Musawah*—in ways that resonate with the region’s distinct socio-religious context. Rather than functioning solely as a top-down extension of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the FKUB emerges as a mediating institution that balances national mandates with the normative realities of local Islamic governance. In practice, FKUB’s efforts are centered around elite-level dialogue, public outreach, and interfaith cooperation. These activities illustrate a model of moderation that is both grounded in Islamic values and responsive to Indonesia’s pluralistic national identity. However, the study also highlights structural limitations—such as inadequate resources, resistance from conservative groups, and limited institutional authority—that constrain FKUB’s ability to engage grassroots communities and address sensitive issues like the construction of houses of worship.

The promotion of religious moderation at the local level, especially in regions governed by a Sharia-based system, is shown to be a negotiated and context-bound process, not a linear implementation of national policy. By shedding light on how local actors reinterpret moderation, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how state-endorsed religious policies are filtered through cultural, institutional, and ideological lenses. The findings also affirm that institutional effectiveness is shaped not only by formal mandates but also by actors’ agency and their capacity to navigate competing pressures on the ground. From a practical standpoint, this study underscores the need to strengthen FKUB’s strategic capacity and resource base, while ensuring sustained local government support and broader public engagement. The national discourse on moderation must also be refined to account for regional diversity and sensitivities. Future research is urgently needed to examine grassroots perceptions, particularly among minority and conservative communities, and to conduct longitudinal and comparative studies across regions. Such efforts are essential for assessing the sustainability and replicability of FKUB’s strategies in navigating religious harmony within complex legal and cultural environments like Aceh.

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