

CONSTRUCTION OF INDONESIAN MODERATE ISLAM IN A GLOBAL VIEW

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Abstract

This article examines the global construction of Moderate Islam as the strategic, religious, and diplomatic identity of Indonesia. As it remains the world's biggest Muslim-majority democracy, Indonesia has pushed Moderate Islam as an alternate narrative to radicalism and extremism, as well as supporting elections, religious diversity, and pluralism. Using a constructivist theoretical perspective, this study employs a qualitative descriptive design methodology, incorporating a systematic literature review. An initial set of 95 documents was identified, and 42 of these were included, based on previously determined inclusion/exclusion criteria. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) was used to evaluate the quality and thematic content analysis, mapping findings to the study aims. The findings suggest that the formation of Moderate Islam in Indonesia is a dynamic relation between state and non-state actors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Muhammadiyah, and Nahdlatul Ulama. These actors collectively construct the image of Moderate Islam as part of Indonesia's soft power strategy and multi-track diplomacy. The report also cites ideological and geographic biases, as well as a split between the official narrative that the country is circulating about the war

and events on the front. However, Moderate Islam may be helpful after all to boost Indonesia's standing in the world and interfaith dialogue within it. This article further enriches the international politics debate by demonstrating how religious identity can be leveraged for diplomatic engagement and norm diffusion, thereby helping to quell sectarian tensions and reduce conflict. It is also helpful in advocating an Islamic approach to democratic governance in global politics.

Keywords: Moderate Islam, Indonesia, Constructivism, Soft Power, Religious Diplomacy, Multi-Track Diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is home to some 229 million Muslims and makes up 13% of the world's Muslim population. One can describe more than half of the Indonesian population as muslim since the number stands at 87% of the total population in Indonesia. However, Indonesia's diversity is exceptionally high. This diversity comes not only from Muslim and non-Muslim populations, but also within the Muslim population itself.¹

Diversity in religion is a historical fact that has existed since the era of the Prophet Muhammad. This diversity has continued to increase. The methods of religion and sects in Islam vary greatly. Differences influence diversity in a person's religious perspective. It can be said that the Islamic religion is one, but the ways of understanding it can vary. The logical consequence of this condition is the emergence of categorization in Islam, with many terms or labels following the word Islam, such as liberal Islam, progressive Islam, moderate Islam, and modernist Islam. There are also categorization labels that are more negative, such as radical Islam, fundamentalist Islam, militant Islam, jihadist Islam, and others.²

Various labels on the word Islam have the potential to hurt the unity of Muslim communities. This naming can create groups of Muslims.³ However, the dynamics that occur in society cannot be avoided and can still place Muslims in a side-by-side position. One of the names of Islam, which is now widely echoed as a norm in Indonesia, is Moderate

¹ Asep Abdurrohman Abdurrohman, "The Existence of Moderate Islam from an Islamic Perspective," *Rausyan Fikr : Journal of Thought and Enlightenment* 14, no. 1 (2018): 29–41, <https://doi.org/10.31000/rf.v14i1.671>.

² Iffati Zamimah, "Islamic Moderatism in the Indonesian Context (A Study of M. Quraish Shihab's Interpretation of Moderate Islam)," *E-Jurnal IIQ* 1, no. 1 (2018): 75–90.

³ Muammar Bakry et al., *THE CONSTRUCTION OF MODERATE ISLAM "Unveiling the Principles of Rationality, Humanity, and Universality in Islam"* (2017).

Islam. In Indonesia, the religious narrative of moderate Islam has long been a pattern embedded culturally and institutionally. Currently, the concept of Moderate Islam is emerging as a distinctive characteristic of the Indonesian state's Islamic diplomacy portfolio.⁴ A central element is the deployment of moderate Islamic discourse in support of global peace. Moderate Islam develops under the assumption that Islamic teachings have a significant influence on political life, including foreign policy.

Islam is a source of values and norms that guide people's behaviors and lives. Religion can be a source of norms in religious politics, particularly in the context of liberal democracy, which fosters parallel thinking.⁵ However, before 1998, Islam was not considered a significant element in Indonesia's foreign relations during the Soeharto and Soekarno eras. There is no Islamic element in Indonesia's foreign policy. The government avoids using Islamic identity and attempts to ensure that Islam does not dictate foreign policy to maintain its neutrality. At that time, Islamic identity had not yet emerged as a key component of Indonesia's foreign policy.⁶

However, the role of Islam as an instrument in foreign relations has evolved. The articulation of Islamic identity has emerged and become a new pattern in Indonesian foreign policy. Although previously, the values of Moderate Islam had been discussed as part of Indonesia's character, the discussion was separate from foreign policy. Thus, the foundation of Moderate Islam in Indonesian foreign policy was laid with the momentum generated by the Indonesian Council on World Affairs (ICWA) meeting on May 19, 2005, in Jakarta. Currently, there is the first speech by the director of Indonesian foreign policy, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), who said that Islamic identity is a projection in global politics. Domestically, the government's efforts to establish a moderate Islamic identity in the country were appreciated by other countries.⁷

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, "The Face of Moderate Islam in Indonesia's Diplomacy," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia* (Jakarta), 2018.

⁵ Nilhakim Nilhakim, "Islam, Liberal Democracy, and Secularism by Nader Hashemi in the Study of Contemporary Islamic Law," *Al-Sulthaniyah* 10, no. 1 (2021): 13–27, <https://doi.org/10.37567/al-sulthaniyah.v10i1.379>.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, "The Face of Moderate Islam in Indonesia's Diplomacy."

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, "The Face of Moderate Islam in Indonesia's Diplomacy."

Since then, the Indonesian regime has attempted to foster some of the moderate features of Islamic civilization. Moderate Islam also reflects Indonesia's efforts to become an 'Islamic-Western Bridge' and a bridge between Islamic Worlds. Since then, Indonesia has articulated Islam as an identity in its foreign policy. Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, has a unique character due to its national ideology, Pancasila, which influences its education. This condition means that Indonesia cannot become an ultra-conservative country like those in the Middle East, a theocracy like Iran, or a secular country like Turkey.⁸

Pancasilaist Islamic education presents Islam in Indonesia as a moderate, tolerant, and democratic religion. On the other hand, the development of radicalism has also colored the development of Moderate Islam in Indonesia. The rise of the global radicalist movement is impacting Indonesia and the world. The emergence of religious radicalization is a shared responsibility for restoring religious teachings with polite and peaceful characteristics. Moreover, this radicalism also appears in one of the categorizations of Islam or Radical Islam. According to data from the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) provided by the Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), Indonesia ranks third among countries in the Asia-Pacific experiencing a significant amount of terrorism activity this year. According to some research, Indonesia has stored as many as 5502 points. This shows that the dynamic impact of radicalism and terrorism is still high in Indonesia.⁹

One way to deradicalize individuals is through persuasive dialogue and embracing various groups, allowing them to gain an understanding of peace. Indonesia continues to promote the label of Moderate Islam with all its positive values from a global perspective. As a country with the largest Muslim majority population in the world, Indonesia can be an example or a role model for a moderate, tolerant, and democratic Islamic country in the world.

Although Indonesian Muslims are the largest in the world, Islamic studies are often placed in an inferior and minor position. In the study of Islamic studies, the Middle East is often regarded as the "center" and a role model for the portrayal of Islam and the face of world Islam. The Middle East is the center of this study on the development of Islamic values

⁸ Zulfadli Zulfadli, "Variations of Islam and Democracy in Muslim Countries: From Islamic Countries to Secular Muslim Countries and Its Relevance to the Discourse of Islam and Democracy," *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan Dan Politik* 35, no. 2 (2022): 193–206, <https://doi.org/10.20473/mkp.v35i22022.193-206>.

⁹ Cindy Mutia Annur, "Indonesia Ranked Among the Top 3 Most Affected Countries by Terrorism in the Asia-Pacific in 2023," in *Kata Data*, 2023.

and norms. Meanwhile, Indonesia's position in Southeast Asia, situated on the periphery and far from the heart of Islam, has received little attention from Islamic scholars. Its existence is considered as "Islamic fringe," so that its Islamic values also tend to be seen as not "pure" and unable to represent the reality of Islam itself. The Islamic world often refers to the Middle East as a 'producer' of 'authentic' Islamic discourse and representation.¹⁰

Previous researchers have widely conducted studies on Moderate Islam in Indonesia. For example, a research underscored Moderate Islam as an idea entrenched in the heritage of Islamic organizations in Indonesia, including Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, with a focus on social harmony and tolerance in the domestic realm.¹¹ Other research discussed how new media serve as a space of contestation where conservative forces contest the narrative of moderation.¹² Latest research wrote about the politics of Moderate Islam as a product of international pressure and domestic contestation, noting that the Indonesian government often manages the discourse of Moderate Islam as a political instrument to discredit political Islamic groups that raise objections.¹³ It is not wrong, since Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, as well as an interesting combination of many moderate Indonesian-Islamic values, can be said to be a pretty reasonable topic to be offered globally for Islamic studies. Islam can be present in the lives of the nation and state. This is a special attraction for studying the construction of Islam in Indonesia from a perspective so that it can contribute to the development of Islamic knowledge and studies in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach because it seeks to explain the relationship between phenomena in society, which are dynamic in nature and require an interpretive analysis of existing patterns. This research will focus on strategy analysis based on the main driving signal in the form of global views on Indonesian Islamic

¹⁰ Abdurrohman, "The Existence of Moderate Islam from an Islamic Perspective."

¹¹ Abdurrohman, "The Existence of Moderate Islam from an Islamic Perspective."

¹² Wahyudi Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v10i1.1-24>.

¹³ Rizky Alif Alvian and Irfan Ardhani, *THE POLITICS OF MODERATE ISLAM IN INDONESIA: Between International Pressure and Domestic Contestations*, in *Al-Jami'ah*, vol. 61, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2023.611.19-57>.

Religions, especially in modern Islam. This research was conducted to determine the developed views through complex signals from various actors. Further research will be conducted based on modern Islamic analysis, with an emphasis on the synergy of various integrated aspects or actors to produce a unique view of Indonesian Islam Moderat.

This type of research is a descriptive qualitative research type with an explanatory research model. This type of research was chosen to obtain answers to the problem formulation because it was considered appropriate because of the character of the research, which is not limited to numerical statistics but rises to a variety of flexible and dynamic patterns in accordance with conditions in the field and narratives that will later be collected in the research process. Therefore, qualitative descriptive research can comprehensively and dynamically capture and interpret various important aspects of the research indicators. The research process can then obtain a clear and complete picture of the condition that is best able to describe the facts objectively based on scientific analysis. The data were then collected from a literature study. Literature research is the right way to produce scientific work suitable for this theme of research.

An initial literature search yielded 95 relevant documents. Following a rigorous screening process, 42 documents were selected for final analysis. The document selection was conducted in several stages. The first involved a comprehensive search using keywords such as “Moderate Islam in Indonesia,” “Islamic diplomacy,” “constructivism and religion,” and “Pancasila and foreign policy.” The criteria for the inclusion of the publication were that the articles should have been published within the last 10 years (2013–2023) and should cover issues related to Indonesia’s Islamic identity, moderate religion, soft power strategy, and the application of constructivist theory in international politics. We included only articles that were published in peer-reviewed journals, scientific journals, and research from reliable academic sources. Studies based solely on the authors' opinions, lacking methodological clarity, and those that only indirectly referred to the Indonesian context were excluded. The other documents were examined content-wise to verify consistency with the theoretical model or the research objectives of the study. Validating the reliability of the chosen sources: The critical assessment skills programme (CASP) was used to ensure the reliability and validity of the selected studies, with a particular focus on qualitative studies; as such, we looked for clear aims, methodological soundness, data collection methods, ethics, and depth of data analysis.

Additionally, we intentionally guard against some of the biases previously identified in

the literature, such as geographic bias (where scholars tend to focus on the Middle East) and ideological bias (which emphasizes either the liberal or conservative interpretation of Islam). These were addressed by selecting dual sources, including international and Indonesian scholars, as well as independent research centers and non-governmental actors. Cross-verification of findings was established through triangulation to minimize dependence on a single narrative. This methodologically stringent approach ensures that the research provides a holistic, balanced, and contextually embedded examination of the global construction and calculated deployment of Indonesia's moderate Islamic identity.

The research is based on Constructivism in understanding the world, as it is the first step in realizing the world. Using the lens of the global construction of moderate Islam, Indonesia constructs and projects a moderate Islam image in its private policy and foreign diplomacy. In the social sciences, it is noted that identity, norms, and social realities are not a given but are constructed, meaning they are created by the sway of social interaction and speech, and are canvassed as part of a time-space-compounded historical weave. This configuration allows us to consider that Moderate Islam in Indonesia is not only a theological text, but also a kind of political-diplomatic identity that is a product of state and non-state entities, such as the government, Islamic organizations (Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama), and civil society.

The sources used in this study were validated in several steps. First, Relevance and Credibility were ensured by selecting sources from indexed academic journals, scholarly books, official government reports, and articles from reputable organizations specializing in Islamic studies and international relations. Second, Citations from Primary Sources were prioritized, with all quoted data derived from primary or secondary sources with strong references to moderate Islam studies, Indonesian diplomacy, and the global construction of Islamic identity. Third, the Peer-Reviewed Journal Evaluation was applied to ensure that all journal sources were selected from peer-reviewed publications to guarantee academic validity and quality. Fourth, a Multi-Source Comparison was conducted by cross-referencing information with multiple sources to eliminate single-source bias in data interpretation.

The reference selection and screening processes followed a systematic approach. First, a Literature Search was conducted using academic databases, such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and nationally indexed journals in SINTA. Second, Inclusion Criteria were applied, prioritizing publications from the last ten years to ensure data relevance and focus on themes related to moderate Islam, Indonesia's foreign policy, Islamic diplomacy, and constructivist studies. Only articles published by reputable academic institutions or research

organizations were considered. Third, Exclusion Criteria were implemented by filtering out articles with political bias or lacking a clear methodological basis, sources from personal blogs or non-credible media, and studies not directly relevant to the research topic. Finally, a Screening Process was conducted using content analysis to ensure that each reference was aligned with the theoretical framework and research objectives.

In this study, a critical analysis was conducted to identify potential biases in the reviewed literature, ensuring that the study of Moderate Islam in Indonesia from a global perspective was not influenced by a single dominant narrative. One of the identified biases is geographical bias, where most literature on Moderate Islam remains centered on the Middle East or Western academic perspectives, thereby overlooking the unique characteristics of Moderate Islam in Indonesia. Additionally, some studies present ideological biases that tend to favor certain interpretations of Islam, whether conservative or liberal, potentially disregarding the complexity of Moderate Islam as a social construct.

RESULT

Indonesia is recognized as a moderately Islamic country by the global community. Moderate Islamic norms relate to the contestation of various Islamic ideas throughout Indonesian history, which are full of dynamics and push-and-pull. Islam, with its various labels, is prone to conflict. In addition, the emergence of radicalism, violence, and terrorism in several countries has opened up the world community to realizing peace and cooperation in religious moderation. Although the labels that follow Islam can vary, Islam adheres to the Qur'an as a single and complete religion. In the Qur'an, several verses reveal the mission of the Islamic religion, the characteristics of Islamic teachings, and the attributes of Muslims. The characteristic of Islamic teachings, as instructed in the Qur'an, is a religion in accordance with humanity's innate nature (fitrah). Muslims are moderate people (ummatahan washatan). In addition, Islam orders its followers to side with the truth (hanif), uphold justice ('adlalah), and goodness to become the best people (khaira ummah).¹⁴ The foundation of the verses in the Koran is a strong foundation for religion with a moderate attitude (tawashut), as promoted by many ulama regarding the concept of Islamic moderation

Construction of Moderate Islam in Indonesia

¹⁴ Abdurrohman, "The Existence of Moderate Islam from an Islamic Perspective."

The construction of Moderate Islam in Indonesia originated from the thoughts of many national figures and their various dynamics. Domestic Muslim groups have widely discussed moderate Islam since the 1998 reformation. One of the most controversial stages of this discourse became more pervasive when Indonesia was faced with an internationally notorious case of terrorism, namely, the case of the Bali Bombing in 2002.¹⁵

Due to this act of terrorism, Islam is now equated with violence, terrorism, and radicalism; mud-slinging has its meaning when the individuals communicating their crime cite religious reasons for it. It was difficult for Muslim scholars and mainstream politicians to acknowledge that parts of Indonesian Islam may have supported terrorism. As a result, the War on Terror was viewed as suspicious.¹⁶ Belief and understanding of religious doctrine are dominant factors, so Western observers easily associate Islamic movements that promote violence with fanaticism and radicalism. There are many factors behind radicalism, including political events and economics. However, issues of belief and understanding of religious doctrines seem to be dominant.¹⁷

As an Islamic-majority nation, Indonesia also needs to underscore that acts of terror are not driven by Islamic teachings. Indonesian Muslims are peaceful due to their moderate beliefs. Based on constructivist concepts, this concept has had a profound impact on International Relations. Constructivism stands in opposition to the realist emphasis on rational actors and material constraints, as well as the liberal focus on institutional constraints, by emphasizing the social and intersubjective aspects of global politics.¹⁸ In short, Indonesia is trying to construct itself as a country with moderate Islam, which is far from radicalism and terrorism. Moderate Islam was described as a value in the Islamic movement that upholds democracy.¹⁹ The concepts of Islam and democracy were also influenced by one of the most influential Muslim thinkers in Indonesia, namely Abdurrahman Wahid, also known as Gus

¹⁵ N. R. Anditya, "Institute of International Studies Universitas Gadjah Mada 1," *IIS Brief*, no. 6 (2017): 1–11.

¹⁶ Alvian and Ardhani, *THE POLITICS OF MODERATE ISLAM IN INDONESIA: Between International Pressure and Domestic Contestations*.

¹⁷ Ahmad Faqihuddin, "Islam Moderate in Indonesia," *Al-Risalah* 12, no. 1 (2021): 107–18, <https://doi.org/10.34005/alrisalah.v12i1.1238>.

¹⁸ Robert Dormer, "The Impact of Constructivism on International Relations Theory: A History," *Kwansei Gakuin University Social Sciences Review* 22 (2017): 51–64.

¹⁹ Bakry et al., *THE CONSTRUCTION OF MODERATE ISLAM "Unveiling the Principles of Rationality, Humanity, and Universality in Islam."*

Dur. Gus Dur stated that the moderate Islamic movement should ideally guarantee the purity of national ideology and the unity of the constitution. The characteristics of moderate Islamic movements are their cultural and religious values. These values were developed to support the country's smooth development.²⁰

In addition, the values of Moderate Islam were also conveyed by Nurcholis Madjid, an Islamic figure who initiated secularism and secularization, stating that moderate Islam also upholds the values of inclusivism and pluralism.²¹ In many studies, moderate Islam has been identified as Islam that is friendly to social dynamics. Moderate Islam encompasses various meanings within the Islamic sect, characterized by justice, balance, tolerance, benevolence, respect, accommodation, inclusivity, non-violence, anti-extremism, anti-radicalism, anti-terrorism, and development.²²

The many problems that occur in Indonesia due to pluralism and friction between religious communities and even within religious communities can be answered with moderate Islam as a representative medium among them. Moderate Islam is not too extreme for the right; in this case, it is overtextual. Moderate Islam is not too extreme to the left in the sense of being overcontextual. Moderate Islam prioritizes a balance between the text and its context, as well as between revelation and reason. This is based on the understanding that both truths come from God. To ignore any of them is to abandon a part of God's truth.²³ The development of Islam as a foundation for moderate Islam in Indonesia has also strengthened since 2018. That year, the Indonesian Minister of Religion stated that Islam Nusantara is an Islamic teaching that emphasizes the moderate principles of tolerance, in accordance with Indonesia's diversity, as outlined in the 1945 Constitution and the ideology of Pancasila. This concept ultimately led to the creation of a peaceful country with diverse local cultural characteristics. The character of moderate Islam is unique and can be referred to as Islam

²⁰ Anditya, "Institute of International Studies Universitas Gadjah Mada 1," 2017.

²¹ Bakry et al., *THE CONSTRUCTION OF MODERATE ISLAM "Unveiling the Principles of Rationality, Humanity, and Universality in Islam."*

²² M . Khamim, "The Universal Values of Islam in Muhammadiyah and NU: A Portrait of Moderate Islam in Indonesia," *El-Hekam* 7, no. 1 (2022): 17–17, <https://doi.org/10.31958/jeh.v7i1.5796>; Bagus Novianto, "Islamic Moderation in Indonesia from the Perspective of Islamic Educational Civilization," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 5, no. 2 (2021): 86–102; Dani Sartika, "Moderate Islam: Between Concept and Praxis in Indonesia," *Tsamratul Fikri | Journal of Islamic Studies* 14, no. 2 (2021): 183–183, <https://doi.org/10.36667/tf.v14i2.532>.

²³ Rahmad Yulianto, "Moderate Islam in Indonesia (Muhammadiyah's Moderation)," *Al-Hikmah: Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 1 (2020): 67–97.

Nusantara.²⁴ The uniqueness of Indonesian Islam is also a special aspect of Moderate Islam in Indonesia. Indonesia constructs its country's Islamic identity through unique and special norms. This process forms the basis of constructivist accounts of political identity construction, which involve shared assumptions or interpretations that collectively attain meaning.²⁵

Moderate Islamic Actors in Indonesia

Many figures play a role in carrying out moderate Islamic values as Indonesian characters. One of the figures who helped to start this was Gus Dur. Gus Dur and Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab, who is also a moderate Islamic scholar, were the actors who incorporated moderate Islamic ideas into their foreign policy.²⁶ Gus Dur is an example of a unit of actors who contributed to the development of Moderate Islam.

Constructivists utilize the concept of identity, which has been demonstrated to be socially constructed and logically precedes interest. They draw from the findings of sociological constructivists to highlight the social processes underlying each person's unique identity. Consequently, constructivists subvert individualist and rationalist ontologies by advancing a social ontology in which every "unit" is only understandable in terms of social construction or embedded nature; units exhibit a "logic of appropriateness."²⁷

Other actors who are equally important in the development of Moderate Islam in Indonesia are Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. Not only did a wide range of Indonesian Muslims attend the most important events, but they also questioned the existence of moderate Islam, which has been controlled by Muhammadiyah and NU, the two largest Muslim groups in recent times. Both well-known groups made a formal request to their members not to attend the events.²⁸ However, both are moderate Islamic organizations that have fought moderate

²⁴ Nurlaila Radiani and Ris'an Rusli, "The Concept of Moderation in Islam Nusantara: A Study of QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 143," *Semiotika-Q Journal: Studies on Quranic Sciences and Tafsir* 1, no. 2 (1970): 116–30, <https://doi.org/10.19109/jsq.v1i2.10384>.

²⁵ Dormer, "The Impact of Constructivism on International Relations Theory: A History."

²⁶ Bakry et al., *THE CONSTRUCTION OF MODERATE ISLAM "Unveiling the Principles of Rationality, Humanity, and Universality in Islam."*

²⁷ Dormer, "The Impact of Constructivism on International Relations Theory: A History."

²⁸ Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities."

Islam in various domains for a long time, including education and social and political matters.²⁹

The long journey of these two organizations has transformed them into civil society institutions that play a crucial role in the moderation process in this country. Muhammadiyah and NU are socio-religious organizations that play a very active role in maintaining and strengthening networks and institutions supporting Islamic moderation. The results of the activities of Moderate Islamic actors in Indonesia have also shown the increasingly strong character of Indonesian Moderate Islam. This makes Indonesia a worthy candidate for a pilot project on tolerance for the outside world.³⁰ Suppose we refer to the significant feature of the constructivist agenda. In that case, it is about how this conceptualization of identity starkly differs from rationalist causal accounts that largely ignore the diversity of agency/identity. Beliefs are key components of the process through which identity emerges.³¹ In Indonesia, moderate Muslims generally support democracy and view it as a valuable tool for enhancing governance. Following Suharto's resignation, several moderate Muslim groups formed political alliances, and the Reformation Order began.³²

Rationally, the construction of Moderate Islam is promoted by strengthening the roles of international relations actors as a unitary agency. Moderate Islamic norms have become a value disseminated abroad through forums established and through the network of institutional structures of these two large Indonesian organizations. The spread of knowledge intensity means that moderate Islam is continuously internalized into foreign policy. This policy can serve as a bridge between Islam and the West and as a policy in responding to problems in the Islamic world. Norms serve as a basis for foreign policy, providing Islamic actors with policy motivation, as Islamic values become foundational knowledge and common perceptions of

²⁹ Khamim, "The Universal Values of Islam in Muhammadiyah and NU: A Portrait of Moderate Islam in Indonesia."

³⁰ Khamim, "The Universal Values of Islam in Muhammadiyah and NU: A Portrait of Moderate Islam in Indonesia."

³¹ Dormer, "The Impact of Constructivism on International Relations Theory: A History."

³² Twediana budi hapsari, "The History of Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Groups and Muslim Media," *Afkaruna* 14, no. 1 (2018): 101–27, <https://doi.org/10.18196/aijjs.2018.0082.101-127>.

foreign relations.³³

Moderate Islam in Indonesian Foreign Relations

The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs began a campaign for Moderate Islam as one of Indonesia's foreign policy identities. This also resulted in an image of Indonesian Moderate Islam in the global construction. The image of Indonesian Islam, concurrent with the pluralistic and tolerant attitudes in Indonesia's context, has undergone dynamic ups and downs and has faced challenges. The image of Moderate Islam in Indonesia has gained worldwide recognition as one of the peaceful, tolerant, and democratic faces of Islam. However, the notion has its critics and skeptics. Misrepresentation of Moderate Islam by the government is one of the main issues. Incidents of intolerance, discrimination against religious minorities, and violence in the name of religion continue, indicating that 'values of moderation' have yet to gain wider currency. In addition, the instrumentalization of moderate Islamic narrative as a political instrument to marginalize conservative Islamic opposition has also drawn critics to see this as an elitist concept that marginalizes terms for pluralistic expression of Indonesian Muslims. Critics also warn that Moderate Islam is at risk of being co-opted as a weapon to stifle dissident and progressive Islamic perspectives under the auspices of pursuing stability and concord. In the midst of efforts to improve the global image of Indonesia's moderate Islam, Indonesia is sometimes unstable at home. Moreover, the events of 11/11/2016 in the Defending Islam action scheme became popular and became an international spotlight. This case raises questions about the power of Moderate Islam in Indonesia.³⁴

The international media is skeptical about the development of Moderate Islam in Indonesia; however, this has not changed Indonesia's political image in the global political arena in a massive way. The Indonesian government continues to strive to maintain Indonesia's image in the world by upholding the values of liberal democracy as a characteristic of moderate Islam in foreign policy. Islam and democracy have become soft powers in the process of constructing a good identity and image through public diplomacy.

Moderate Islam, which promotes freedom and democracy from a global perspective, leaves a question. Since the Middle East represents Islam at the center of the world, democratization in this area has been seen as problematic. However, recent studies on Islam

³³ Andi Purwono and Mohtar Mas'ood, "Moderate Islam in Indonesia's Foreign Policy in the Reform Era" (Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2018).

³⁴ N. R. Anditya, "Institute of International Studies Universitas Gadjah Mada 1," *IIS Brief*, no. 6 (2017): 1–11.

and democracy since the Arab Spring have revealed the influence of social liberalization, economic globalization, and political fragmentation on the Middle East's fight against autocratic rulers. Ten years after the start of the Arab Spring upheaval in the Middle East, there are still issues of fighting and getting involved in civil wars. The planned shift has not gone smoothly; on the contrary, political parties, ethnic groups, and religious and sectarian interests have become captive. This element contributes to ongoing political unrest in the Middle East.³⁵

Critical studies that contest the idea that Islam and democracy are incompatible have appeared in reactions to research that evaluates Islam's incompatibility with democracy. Muslim and Western scholars have conducted these studies. This group believes that Islam needs to be distinguished moderately.³⁶ Indonesia is actively involved in various international forums to build a strong construction of moderate Indonesian Islam from a global perspective. Among them are the ASEAN Summit, the NGO Forum on the Indonesian Bali Democracy Forum, and the Arab Islamic American Summit, all aimed at maintaining its image. Indonesia hosted the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders, thereby enhancing the positive image of moderate Islam in Indonesia.³⁷

The success of Indonesia's Moderate Islamic diplomacy in building a positive global image is supported by quantitative data that show Indonesia's improved global position. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center in 2013, Indonesia is a Muslim nation that is more tolerant than several Middle Eastern Muslim countries. However, according to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), Indonesia scored 5,502 points, being the country most impacted by terrorism in the Asia Pacific, proving that the threat of radicalism still lingers on. Meanwhile, the Democracy Index 2023 categorized Indonesia as a "Flawed Democracy" with a score of 6.71, which is better than many other Muslim-majority countries. Additionally, the efforts made by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which involve over 170 universities, 30,000 schools, and 400 hospitals, play a crucial role as moderate Islamic actors in building a tolerant and inclusive society. These findings consolidate Indonesia as a good

³⁵ Zulfadli, "Variations of Islam and Democracy in Muslim Countries: From Islamic Countries to Secular Muslim Countries and Its Relevance to the Discourse of Islam and Democracy."

³⁶ Zulfadli, "Variations of Islam and Democracy in Muslim Countries: From Islamic Countries to Secular Muslim Countries and Its Relevance to the Discourse of Islam and Democracy."

³⁷ Anditya, "Institute of International Studies Universitas Gadjah Mada 1," 2017.

model of a Muslim country in managing Islamic values within the context of democracy, tolerance, and social development.

Indonesia is a moderately tolerant, reasonably Islamic country, and we will continue to develop pluralism, the government has said. The orientation of Indonesia's foreign policy has been seen as indicating that the vast majority of the Indonesian Muslims continue to uphold moderate values of Islam, as also seen by other countries regarding Indonesia. This recognition was assessed by the presence of a delegation from the Al-Muslimin Hukama Council in Indonesia in 2023, which aimed to learn about tolerant Islam in Indonesia. The Hukama Council is a global network of Muslim scholars, with its headquarters in Abu Dhabi.³⁸ Their presence was an achievement because they were there to learn about tolerant Islam, which has been recognized in Indonesia. This also opens up the opportunity for Indonesia to become an even stronger research base for Islamic studies with its moderate Islamic character.

Tolerance and harmony in Indonesia cannot be separated from the values embedded in the state foundation of Pancasila. With Pancasila, diversity in the Indonesian nation can be established with respect to the values and practices of diverse religions. Indonesian Muslims have also developed the basic concept of ukhuwah (brotherhood) from three aspects: ukhuwah Islamiyah, the brotherhood of fellow Muslims; ukhuwah wathaniyah, the brotherhood of one nation; and ukhuwah insaniyah, the brotherhood of fellow humans. This is important for minimizing the friction that occurs at the grassroots.³⁹

As a source of religious teachings, the Al-Quran as a Islamic foundation emphasizes respect for diversity and a willingness to act "O mankind, indeed We created you from one man and one woman and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other..."(QS. Al-Hujurat:13). This shows that Islam expresses religion wisely and politely in the face of pluralism and as a part of democracy.⁴⁰

Until now, religion has been one of the diplomatic channels developed by the Indonesian government to carry out its foreign policy. In fact, through the Indonesian Minister of Foreign

³⁸ Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, "Vice President: World Scholars Acknowledge Indonesia's Ability to Practice Moderate and Tolerant Islam," *Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia* (Jakarta), January 2022.

³⁹ Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, "Vice President: World Scholars Acknowledge Indonesia's Ability to Practice Moderate and Tolerant Islam."

⁴⁰ Faqihuddin, "Islam Moderate in Indonesia."

Affairs, Retno Marsudi, it was explained that Indonesia's political priorities for 2019-2024, which include efforts to 'Increase Indonesia's contribution and leadership,' also presented the issue of countering extremism. Therefore, one important medium is to prioritize moderate Islamic values. New constructivist thinking seeks to rediscover the importance of rules, law, and language, and incorporate new issues, such as emotions.⁴¹ In this way, Moderate Islam is conceptualized as a clear agenda for gaining global attention.

This can be achieved through multitrack diplomacy, consisting of nine tracks: Government, NGOs and Professionals; Business or Commerce; Individual or Individual; Research, Training and Education; Advocacy Activities; Religion; Fund; and Communications and Media. Religion is one such path. Therefore, through multitrack diplomacy, Indonesia can encourage various efforts to show a moderate and peaceful face of Islam, including the promotion of Islam (Rahmatan Lil Alamin). This is also one of Indonesia's strategies for dealing with the spread of violent ideas or radicalism, whose movement is unpredictable. In building tolerance among people, various actors need to be involved in shaping Indonesia's image, which can be achieved through organizations or communication forums. Many fields can integrate Moderate Islamic values, such as economics. Indonesia is developing Sharia economics and finance to improve the welfare of all of Indonesian society inclusively. In international relations, Indonesia plays a significant role in efforts to promote world peace, particularly in Muslim countries that continue to be affected by conflicts and crises. These steps can encourage the practice of Islamic rahmatan lil alamin both domestically and globally, mainly when other collaborations are undertaken.⁴²

Various Indonesian Islamic agents and figures can work together with the Indonesian government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in formulating a diplomatic strategy for the spread of moderate Islam so that it can color Indonesian foreign policy and promote Indonesian Islam as rahmatan lil Muslimin. Strengthening multitrack diplomacy not only relies on official diplomats but can also utilize various stakeholders to carry out diplomatic work according to their capacities.

DISCUSSION

⁴¹ Lucrecia García Iommi, "The New Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Affairs* 98, no. 5 (2022): 1783–84, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia153>.

⁴² Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, "Vice President: World Scholars Acknowledge Indonesia's Ability to Practice Moderate and Tolerant Islam."

The results of this research highlight that the establishment of Moderate Islam in Indonesia is a negotiation process between state and non-state actors, aligning with the basic assumptions of constructivist theories in international relations. The study concludes that Indonesian Moderate Islam is not a static or predetermined phenomenon, but rather a work in progress influenced by four- or five-century-old historical, political, and social processes. The involvement of entities as diverse as Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and government bodies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs speaks to the operation of social norms and national identity in shaping not only domestic discourses about womanhood but also modes of diplomatic representation on the international stage.

This also further emphasizes the role of Moderate Islam as a strategic foreign policy instrument of Indonesia. By pursuing a multi-track diplomacy strategy, Indonesia presents Moderate Islam as a counter-narrative of radicalism and extremism. It reasserts its identity as a majority-Muslim, liberal, and democratic state. This supports the constructivist assertion that the behaviour of states is determined by more than just material interests, but also ideational factors such as identity and norms. Indonesia's diplomatic relations are cultivated through its foreign policy, participation in international forums, cooperation with civil society organizations, and engagement with multilateral bodies, demonstrating that religious and cultural identities can form a narrative that enables one to think beyond the nation-state and influence international policy.

This study suggests that a constructive perception of the world could help Indonesia become a moderate Islamic country. According to constructivism, international norms are not only developed through domestic actors; external recognition of the state and interaction also play a role. Through this study, however, it is evident that while Indonesia actively projects Moderate Islam as an official component of its foreign policy, global responses that span from embracing to rejecting moderate Islam also supplement its facilitation. Examples, including the Indonesian presence at the ASEAN Summit and the Bali Democracy Forum, describe how MiRaI is not only a national concoction but also a globally contested discourse.

Indonesian moderate Islam, although internationally known as the epitome of tolerant, peaceful, and democratic Islam, is confronted with several issues and criticisms. The first obstacle is the cognitive dissonance between the government's preaching (Moderate Islam) and what is happening on the street. Instances of intolerance, discrimination against religious minorities, and religion-based violence are rife, proving that the values of moderation have not

been deeply rooted nationwide.⁴³ Critics also highlight the use of Moderate Islam as a political weapon to muzzle the Islamic conservative opposition. Some consider this to be elitist and not a completely accurate representation of all the various voices of Indonesian Muslims. There is the fear that the voice of Moderate Islam will be exploited, acting as a means of stifling critical and progressive voices of Islam, under the mere banner of harmony and stability.

A further potential source of contradiction is the disharmony between Moderate Islam values and national policies and international relations. Although the Indonesian government advances democracy and freedom, some local regulations represent limitations on the freedom of religion and expression. This casts serious doubt on Indonesia's commitment to upholding the principles of moderation.

In addition, it has been condemned by conservative Islamic organizations who view Moderate Islam as a bid for secularization and westernization, and sacrilege towards Islamic thought. They argue that such an idea is more of a compromise with Western values rather than a strict adherence to Islamic teachings in their entirety. While Indonesia received praise across the world with its Moderate Islam diplomacy, there is still a doubt about how far this policy will be effective in eradicating radicalism and terrorism. According to the Global Terrorism Index, Indonesia ranked 31st in the world in 2023, indicating a higher risk of radicalism

There may also be a contradiction between democratic norms and Islamic political values.⁴⁴ Some research indicates that, despite Indonesia's efforts to apply democracy, the state faces its own unique challenges in integrating Islamic values into its political system. Challenges and critiques are crucial for a comprehensive and critical analysis of Moderate Islam in Indonesia, not only from success narratives, but also from possible contradictions (Hamdani, 2020).

By incorporating such findings, this analysis adds to constructivist theory a concrete case that testifies to the idea that a religious identity can be both domestic and diplomatic. It questions the realist and liberal orthodoxy by showing that ideas, including religious

⁴³ Alviaan and Ardhani, *THE POLITICS OF MODERATE ISLAM IN INDONESIA: Between International Pressure and Domestic Contestations*.

⁴⁴ Institute for Economics & Peace, "Global Terrorism Index 2024," The Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>.

moderation, play a significant role in shaping Indonesia's international conduct. This study also contributes to a distinct constructivist discourse in treating religious norms as spreadable, internalizable, and negotiable sets of beliefs in global diplomatic practices, further endorsing the observation that international relations are constantly constructed and reconstructed through communication and the habit of the mind.

CONCLUSION

This study presents an empirically novel indication that the production of Indonesia's Middle-Islam is not purely a theological or normative category, but a strategically developed identity contingent upon contextual and historical conditions, local politics, and international posturing. From a constructivist perspective, Moderate Islam can be understood as the outcome of a social process that unfolds through interaction, activist politics, and norm entrepreneurship on the part of both state and non-state actors. In reality, institutions like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Muhammadiyah, and Nahdlatul Ulama all play a substantial leading role in institutionalizing the moderatist narrative into Indonesia's foreign policy and soft power diplomacy, part 2. The results suggest that Indonesia instrumentalizes Moderate Islam as a means of public diplomacy and a banner of religious tolerance, democracy, and peaceful coexistence. Indonesia practices multi-track diplomacy to make itself an Islamic state with a global Muslim identity, which is different from other Middle Eastern countries, which are more radical or conservative. However, this foreign-facing posture is frequently at odds with unresolved domestic difficulties, such as growing intolerance, ideological alienation, and the political appropriation of religious rhetoric.

Crucially, the research reveals the two sides of Moderate Islam - as a cohesive perspective and an opposing political narrative. On the one hand, at the international level, it enables Indonesia to benefit from normative capital; on the other hand, it leads to criticisms and scepticism regarding inclusivity and good faith in the case of local partial implementation. This disconnect between declarations of intent and substance of policy must be addressed if there is to be any hope of retaining credibility or authority at home or abroad. This study makes contributions to political science and international relations by demonstrating how religious identity can function as soft power and diplomatic capital. This is true not only for the initiation but also for the maintenance of a Moderate Islam model, where Indonesia has historically played a neutral role in balancing transnational Islamic movements and global

political transformation, especially during the period of post-truth politics, identity populism, and geopolitical realignment. A longitudinal-comparative approach may also facilitate understanding of how the adaptation and resilience of the model/general model work within other sociopolitical frameworks.

Suggestion

The concluding part of this research should contain a list of main recommendations. First, Indonesia must develop Moderate Islam as a diplomatic vehicle, to be used through multi-track diplomacy, both state and non-state, in efforts to reinforce Islamic moderation as a global identity for a tolerant and democratic religion. Second, at home, the government also needs to narrow the chasm that exists between the official narrative of Moderate Islam and on-the-ground social relations in the country by tackling intolerance and discrimination with education and inclusive policies. Third, while accepting criticism, the study should have illustrated the measure of balance between inclusion, democracy, and human rights. Finally, the role of Moderate Islam in the fields of education, economy, and international comparison should be more thoroughly investigated to achieve the aforementioned strategic impact across the country and abroad.

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