



Religious Moderation and the Challenge of Identity Politics: A Comparative Study of *Wasatiyyah* Islam Narratives in Malaysia and Indonesia

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Abstract

This comparative study examines *Wasatiyyah* (Islamic moderation) narratives in Indonesia and Malaysia, focusing on tensions arising from the intersection of moderation discourse and identity politics. Employing discourse analysis, case studies, and state-Islam frameworks, the research investigates how state institutions, mass Islamic organizations, and civil society shape the interpretation and institutionalization of moderation in both countries. Findings indicate that while both governments promote moderation to counter extremism, divergent political-institutional contexts produce different outcomes: Indonesia exhibits a more decentralized, pluralistic landscape with significant influence from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, whereas Malaysia shows a centralized model with strong state agencies (JAKIM, *Wasatiyyah* Institute) guiding the narrative. The study highlights risks of political instrumentalization of moderation, implications for religious freedom, and the need for balanced top-down and bottom-up approaches to sustain inclusivity. Policy suggestions include strengthening interfaith dialogue, increasing policy transparency, and improving accountability of state religious bodies

Keywords: *Wasatiyyah*; Religious moderation; Indonesia; Malaysia; Identity politics.

Abstrak

Penelitian komparatif ini menelaah narasi *Wasatiyyah* (moderasi Islam) di Indonesia dan Malaysia, serta dinamika ketegangan yang muncul ketika nilai-nilai moderasi berinteraksi dengan politik identitas. Menggunakan pendekatan analisis wacana, studi kasus, dan kerangka hubungan negara-Islam, penelitian mengkaji peran institusi negara, organisasi massa Islam, dan masyarakat sipil dalam membentuk implementasi moderasi di kedua negara. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kedua negara mempromosikan prinsip moderasi untuk meredam ekstremisme, konteks politik-institusional membentuk jalan implementasinya: Indonesia menonjolkan model desentralisasi dengan keterlibatan kuat organisasi seperti Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) dan Muhammadiyah, sementara Malaysia memperlihatkan model tersentralisasi di mana agensi negara (JAKIM, Institut *Wasatiyyah*) memiliki peran sentral. Studi ini

menyoroti risiko instrumentalitas Wasatiyyah oleh aktor politik, implikasinya terhadap kebebasan beragama, dan perlunya keseimbangan antara pendekatan top-down dan bottom-up untuk menjaga inklusivitas. Rekomendasi meliputi penguatan dialog antar-agama, transparansi kebijakan moderasi, dan peningkatan akuntabilitas lembaga keagamaan negara.

Kata kunci: *Wasatiyyah*; Moderasi Beragama; Indonesia; Malaysia; Politik Identitas.

Introduction

Wasatiyyah, an Arabic term signifying moderation, balance, and the middle path, has emerged as a pivotal Islamic discourse in Southeast Asia, particularly within Indonesia and Malaysia. This concept is deeply rooted in the Qur'an, which designates the Muslim community as *ummatah wasatan* (a justly balanced community).¹ Its contemporary prominence in the region is largely a state-led response aimed at countering the rise of religious extremism, radicalism, and intolerance.² This strategic embrace of moderation seeks to combat the influence of radical groups such as ISIS, Hizbut Tahrir, and Jemaah Islamiyah, which have posed significant security challenges in the region.³

Both Indonesia and Malaysia officially promote religious moderation, recognizing its importance for national stability and social cohesion. However, their distinct socio-political landscapes profoundly shape the narratives and practical implementation of *Wasatiyyah*. Indonesia operates as a democracy with a more decentralized religious authority, allowing for a diverse array of interpretations and a robust civil society engagement. Conversely, Malaysia functions as a semi-authoritarian state characterized by centralized Islamic institutions, which exert significant control over religious affairs.⁴ The official promotion of *Wasatiyyah* in both countries, while serving as a counter-narrative against extremism, reveals an inherent tension between

¹ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, "The Indications of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam," *ICR Journal* 7, no. 2 (2016): 264–66, <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v7i2.267>.

² Rosidi Bahri et al., "Religious Moderation Education: A Comparative Study Of Islamic Approaches In Indonesia And Malaysia With Implications For Faith-Based Education," *International Studies in Catholic Education*, June 24, 2025, 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2025.2519727>.

³ Ma'ruf Amin, "Emergence Of Wasatiyyah Islam: Promoting 'Middle Way' Islam And Socio-Economic Equality In Indonesia – Analysis," sec. 1, *Eurasia Review*, November 6, 2018, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/06112018-emergence-of-wasatiyyah-islam-promoting-middle-way-islam-and-socio-economic-equality-in-indonesia-analysis/>.

⁴ Bahri et al., "Religious Moderation Education."

universal Islamic principles and specific national governance models. This structural difference in political systems suggests that even with a shared objective of fostering moderation, the methods employed and the resultant outcomes will inevitably diverge. The state's active role in promoting this concept further indicates a top-down approach, which carries the potential for instrumentalization, leading to a dynamic interplay between ideal and practical application.

Despite its promotion as a theological principle to counter extremism and foster coexistence, *Wasatiyyah* frequently becomes entangled with identity politics and state agendas.⁵ This entanglement is particularly pronounced in contexts where religious identity is closely intertwined with national identity or political power, leading to the instrumentalization of *Wasatiyyah*. The instrumentalization risks undermining the inclusive aims of moderation, potentially exacerbating societal divisions rather than mitigating them. For instance, in Indonesia, identity politics has been leveraged during elections, leading to polarization and the use of religious rhetoric.⁶ Similarly, in Malaysia, the conflation of Malay ethnicity with Islam has fueled exclusionary identity politics, where populist leaders blame "others" for destabilizing the political order.⁷

The consistent appearance of identity politics as a challenge across various contexts suggests it is a central, rather than peripheral, issue. If *Wasatiyyah* is intended to cultivate harmony and mutual understanding, its co-option for political purposes represents a fundamental contradiction. This strategic misuse of a profound theological concept for political gain highlights the inherent fragility and potential for subversion of state-led moderation initiatives, especially in pluralistic societies. The existing body of comparative research on how state actors, religious institutions, and civil society define and operationalize *Wasatiyyah* in these distinct socio-political environments, particularly concerning the tensions arising from its

⁵ Wasisto Raharjo Jati, "The Religious Moderation For Indonesia Muslim Middle Class: Challenges And Solutions," *Penamas* 36, no. 1 (2023): 19–36, <https://doi.org/10.31330/penamas.v36i1.647>.

⁶ Firdaus Arifin et al., "Indonesia's Identity Politics And Populism: Disruption To National Cohesion," *Jurnal Civics: Media Kajian Kewarganegaraan* 22, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.21831/jc.v22i1.1291>.

⁷ Syaza Shukri, "Islamist Civilizationism in Malaysia," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (2023): 209, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020209>.

intersection with identity politics, remains limited. A deeper comparative analysis is therefore warranted to illuminate these complex dynamics.

This study explores the dynamics of *Wasatiyyah*—Islamic moderation—as interpreted and institutionalized in two key Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia: Indonesia and Malaysia. It examines how both nations navigate the interplay between inclusive ideals of religious moderation and the rise of exclusive identity politics, which often create friction within public discourse and religious governance. The study also investigates the responses of Muslim scholars, policymakers, and activists as they confront these evolving challenges in their respective national contexts.

Through a comparative analysis, the research sheds light on broader issues of Islamic governance, pluralism, and the negotiation of religious values in public life. It offers a critical perspective on how universal Islamic principles are adapted—or contested—within specific political and cultural frameworks. By highlighting the similarities and differences between Indonesia and Malaysia, the study deepens our understanding of the ongoing struggle to balance religious authenticity with social inclusivity.

Ultimately, the findings contribute to the academic and policy discourse on religious moderation, offering a valuable reference for future initiatives that seek to strengthen harmonious coexistence and responsible religious expression in plural societies.

Methods

Qualitative Comparative Analysis Approach

This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis to investigate the complex phenomenon of *Wasatiyyah* Islam narratives in Malaysia and Indonesia. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring how similar concepts are interpreted, institutionalized, and practically implemented within distinct socio-political environments.⁸ By focusing on detailed, context-specific cases, the analysis aims to uncover the nuances of how religious moderation is understood and operationalized in each country, rather than merely identifying broad similarities or differences. This method allows for an in-depth

⁸ Bahri et al., “Religious Moderation Education.”

examination of the interplay between theological ideals and political realities, providing a rich understanding of the challenges and opportunities for *Wasatiyyah* in diverse Muslim-majority contexts.

To facilitate a comprehensive and rigorous analysis, the study integrates several key analytical frameworks:

1. **Discourse Analysis:** This framework is utilized to systematically examine how *Wasatiyyah* is articulated, framed, and legitimized by various actors—including state institutions, religious authorities, and civil society organizations. The analysis scrutinizes policy documents, official speeches, media reports, and academic publications to identify dominant narratives, counter-narratives, and the underlying power dynamics shaping the discourse of religious moderation.⁹ This approach helps to deconstruct the ways in which *Wasatiyyah* is presented and perceived, revealing its intended and unintended implications.
2. **Identity Politics Theory:** This theoretical lens is applied to understand how religious identity is mobilized, politicized, and instrumentalized within the political spheres of Indonesia and Malaysia. It investigates the direct impact of these processes on the discourse and practice of religious moderation.¹⁰ By focusing on how group interests based on religious affiliation influence political actions, this framework illuminates the tensions between inclusive moderation and exclusive identity-driven agendas.
3. **State-Islam Relationship Frameworks:** This framework is crucial for analyzing the varying degrees of state control over religious affairs, the institutionalization of Islam, and the resulting implications for religious pluralism and the promotion of moderation in each country.¹¹ It helps to differentiate between models of religious governance and their effects on the autonomy of religious institutions and civil society.

The data for this study were drawn from a diverse range of sources to ensure comprehensive coverage and triangulation of information. These sources included official policy documents, such as

⁹ Bahri et al., “Religious Moderation Education.”

¹⁰ Bahri et al., “Religious Moderation Education.”

¹¹ Firdaus Yuni Dharta et al., “MUI’s Fatwa On Interfaith Greetings And Religious Tolerance: Can Indonesia Find A Middle Ground?,” *Frontiers in Communication* 10 (May 2025): 1537568, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1537568>.

Indonesia's *Moderasi beragama* policy and Malaysia's *Wasatiyyah* Institute initiatives, as well as Pancasila-based policies in Indonesia. The dataset also incorporated speeches and writings by prominent Islamic authorities and state officials, media discourse, and publications from civil society organizations. Additionally, academic journal articles, scholarly books, and conference proceedings contributed to the empirical foundation of the analysis, providing expert interpretations and research findings on the subject.¹² This multi-faceted data collection strategy allowed for a rich and nuanced understanding of the *Wasatiyyah* narratives and their intersection with identity politics in both countries.

Results and Discussion

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Theological and Historical Foundations of *Wasatiyyah* Islam

Wasatiyyah, often translated as the "middle path," "moderation," "balance," or "justice," represents a fundamental Islamic principle deeply embedded in the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. The Qur'anic verse (al-Baqarah, 2:143) explicitly designates the Muslim community as *ummatan wasatan*, signifying a justly balanced community that serves as a witness for truth and justice. This foundational concept is intrinsically linked to core Islamic values, including justice (*'adl*), mutual recognition (*ta'aruf*), dialogue (*hiwar*), cooperation (*ta'awun*), forgiveness, and the removal of hardship (*maqasid al-shariah*). *Wasatiyyah* advocates for an equilibrium between extremes, such as excessive materialism and ungrounded spirituality, or overly strict and excessively lax interpretations of religious practice.¹³ It encourages a balanced approach in all aspects of life, from personal conduct and worship to social interactions and governance.

Historically, the Prophet Muhammad and the Orthodox Caliphs exemplified the principles of *Wasatiyyah*, notably emphasizing *shura* (consultation) as a principal mode of decision-making in public

¹² Bahri et al., "Religious Moderation Education."

¹³ Kamali, "The Indicators of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

affairs.¹⁴ The introduction and spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, particularly across the Malay Archipelago, were largely characterized by a gradual and peaceful infusion. This process was often facilitated by Muslim traders and Sufi missionaries who engaged in daily interactions and intermarriages, rather than through coercive means.¹⁵ This historical trajectory of peaceful propagation aligns with the inherent moderation of *Wasatiyyah*.

The deep theological roots and historical practice of *Wasatiyyah* establish it as a universal ethical principle within Islam, providing a powerful normative basis for contemporary moderation discourses. However, a significant tension arises when this universal ideal is adopted and applied within the frameworks of modern nation-states. In such contexts, the inherent universality of *Wasatiyyah* often clashes with specific nationalistic or political agendas, leading to its meaning being narrowed, reinterpreted, or even instrumentalized to serve particular state interests. This dynamic sets the stage for the comparative analysis undertaken in this study, exploring how this foundational Islamic concept navigates the complexities of contemporary political realities.

Table 1: Core Principles of *Wasatiyyah* (Theological Interpretations)

Principle	Qur'anic/Hadith Basis	Brief Description	Key Scholarly Interpretations
Justice (<i>'adl</i>)	Q 2:143 (<i>ummatan wasatan</i>), Q 5:8, Q 7:199	Fairness, impartiality, upholding rights and well-being of all, even in	Ibn Kathir, al-Tabari, al-Qaradawi, Kamali, Hassan, ¹⁶

¹⁴ Kamali, "The Indicators of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

¹⁵ Anthony H Johns, "Islam in Southeast Asia: Reflections and New Directions," *Indonesia*, no. 19 (1975): 33–55.

¹⁶ Kamali, "The Indicators of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

		hostility; closest synonym for <i>Wasatiyyah</i>	
Balance (<i>tawazun</i>)	Q 25:67, Q 3:134, Q 7:31	Avoiding excess (<i>israf</i>) and deficiency (<i>tafrit</i>); equilibrium between extremes (e.g., materialism/spirituality, strictness/laxity)	al-Qaradawi, Kamali, Haron Din, Quraish Shihab, ¹⁷
Mutual Recognition (<i>ta'aruf</i>)	Q 49:13	Acknowledging and respecting others, fostering friendship and peaceful coexistence among diverse communities	¹⁸
Dialogue (<i>hiwar</i>) & Cooperation (<i>ta'awun</i>)	Q 5:2	Engaging in constructive conversation and working together for beneficial objectives, avoiding hostility and sin	¹⁹

¹⁷ Kamali, "The Indicators of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

¹⁸ Kamali, "The Indicators of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

¹⁹ Kamali, "The Indicators of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

Removal of Hardship (taysir)	<i>Maqasid al-shariah</i>	Prioritizing easier solutions and lightening people's burdens in legal rulings and daily life	20
Forgiveness & Modesty	Q 3:134, Q 25:63, Q 2:178, Hadith on <i>al-haya'</i>	Choosing forgiveness over retaliation; peaceful, humble conduct; ethical character development	21

Wasatiyyah Narratives and Implementation: Country-Specific Findings

Indonesia: Wasatiyyah in a Decentralized Context

Indonesia's approach to *Wasatiyyah*, often termed "*Moderasi beragama*" (Religious Moderation), is characterized by a blend of state-led initiatives and strong civil society engagement within a democratic and largely decentralized religious landscape.

State Promotion and Institutionalization

The Indonesian government, primarily through the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA), has actively institutionalized "*Moderasi beragama*" as a national policy since 2019.²² This policy was conceptualized as a direct response to the escalating threats of religious extremism, radicalism, and intolerance witnessed over the past two decades.²³ It is a prioritized program, integrated into the National

²⁰ Kamali, "The Indications of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

²¹ Kamali, "The Indications of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

²² Kementerian Agama RI, *Tanya Jawab Moderasi Beragama* (Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2019).

²³ Edison R. L. Tinambunan et al., "Implication Abu Dhabi Document: To Build Religious Moderation With Brotherhood-Sisterhood And Friendship In Indonesia," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 12, no. 1 (2025): 2451514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2451514>.

Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN 2020-2024), and benefits from significant budget allocations.²⁴

MORA's "*Moderasi beragama*" policy emphasizes three core elements: humanity, consensus (*mitsaqan ghalida*), and public order.²⁵ These elements are translated into practical principles such as *tawassuth* (middle way), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *i'tidal* (fairness).²⁶ The implementation strategies include educational programs, counseling, training, interfaith dialogues, and community-level initiatives like "*Kampung moderasi beragama*" (Villages of Religious Moderation) and short film festivals.²⁷ The National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) also supports religious moderation as a key strategy for deradicalization, emphasizing community-based approaches and cross-sector collaboration.²⁸

The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), while technically an independent non-governmental body, functions as a crucial partner to the government in religious affairs. MUI issues fatwas (legal opinions) and advises MORA on various religious matters, including halal certification and dispute mediation. However, this partnership is often marked by tension, particularly concerning sensitive topics like religious moderation and interfaith relations. MUI's autonomy in issuing fatwas can lead to divergent positions between religious scholars and state authorities, especially when MUI's rulings challenge or critique prevailing government policies.²⁹

Indonesia's state-led religious moderation policy, "*Moderasi Beragama*," aims for broad societal impact by integrating it into national development plans and collaborating with key religious bodies. However, this predominantly top-down approach, coupled with its

²⁴ Ismandianto Ismandianto, "Islamic Leadership and Political Engagement: The Role of Ulama in Indonesia's Democratic Dynamic," *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences (PJLSS)* 23, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2025-23.1.00272>.

²⁵ Syafiq Hasyim, *Jokowi's Moderasi Beragama: Challenge and Opportunity* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021).

²⁶ *Tanya Jawab Moderasi Beragama*.

²⁷ Najwa Abdullah, "Mainstreaming Religious Moderation in Indonesia's Urban Spaces," *FULCRUM*, October 29, 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/mainstreaming-religious-moderation-in-indonesias-urban-spaces/>.

²⁸ Dadang Kuswana, "Digital Counter-Radicalism: The Strategic Role of Religious Organisations in Shaping Moderate Islam in Indonesia's Cyber Realm," *Khazanah Theologia* 6, no. 1 (2024): 45–60, <https://doi.org/10.15575/kt.v6i1.33369>.

²⁹ Dharta et al., "MUI's Fatwa on Interfaith Greetings and Religious Tolerance."

strong association with counter-terrorism efforts, can inadvertently create a "Muslim-bias" in its implementation and lead to perceptions of ideological screening.³⁰ This arises from the extensive governmental infrastructure and policy integration (RPJMN, MORA, BNPT, MUI involvement).³¹ The critiques regarding "Muslim-bias"³² and "ideological screening" suggest that despite its stated inclusive goals, the state's efforts may be perceived as imposing a specific, state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam, potentially generating resistance rather than universal acceptance.

Alignment with Pancasila Ideology

Wasatiyyah in Indonesia is deeply intertwined with the state ideology of Pancasila, which comprises five foundational principles: monotheism, civilized humanity, national unity, deliberative democracy, and social justice.³³ Pancasila serves as a foundational framework for religious moderation, aiming to unify diverse religious differences without explicitly favoring any single faith.³⁴ The first principle, monotheism, is interpreted loosely to include various recognized religions (Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism), demonstrating a form of moderation by not strictly limiting it to Abrahamic traditions.

President Joko Widodo's administration has actively championed Pancasila to combat rising Islamism and promote a moderate brand of Islam. This strategy views Pancasila as a crucial counterweight to religious fundamentalism and a means to re-establish a unifying national identity.³⁵ The efforts to bolster Pancasila are seen as a demonstration of the Indonesian government's commitment to tolerance and religious moderation.³⁶

³⁰ Ismandianto, "Islamic Leadership and Political Engagement."

³¹ *Tanya Jawab Moderasi Beragama*.

³² Hasyim, *Jokowi's Moderasi Beragama: Challenge and Opportunity*.

³³ Amanda Tho Seeth, *Indonesia's Islamic Peace Diplomacy: Crafting a Role Model for Moderate Islam*, DEU, 2023.

³⁴ Zahrotun Nikmah and Naufan Sadida Rashif, "Exploring Religious Moderation through the Lens of Pancasila's First Precept: Insights from the 2024 Collaborative KKN Program," 1, no. 1 (2024): 152–58.

³⁵ {Citation}

³⁶ Patrick Greenwalt, *Factsheet: Indonesia's Pancasila*, n.d.

While Pancasila provides a crucial ideological umbrella for Indonesia's *Wasatiyyah* efforts, framing religious moderation within a broader national commitment to unity and diversity, its interpretation and application by the state can be selective. For instance, while it accommodates officially recognized religions, it leaves no room for atheists or other non-theist communities.³⁷ Furthermore, the application of Pancasila-based policies can be inconsistent, particularly for religious minorities who face challenges in areas such as building places of worship. This suggests that while Pancasila aims to promote moderation among recognized faiths, its current implementation may not fully extend to genuine religious pluralism or adequately address underlying legal issues that impinge on religious freedom for all groups.³⁸ This indicates a preference for a "managed pluralism" rather than a truly open and inclusive pluralistic society.

Influence of Islamic Mass Organizations: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's two largest Islamic mass organizations, possess extensive grassroots networks and play a pivotal role in shaping the discourse and practice of *Wasatiyyah*.³⁹ These organizations are widely regarded as moderate and inclusive, adhering to Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah doctrines while demonstrating a notable capacity to accommodate local cultures and wisdoms. NU identifies its approach as "*Islam Nusantara*" (Archipelagic Islam), emphasizing its unique interaction with Indonesian socio-cultural conditions, promoting moderation, anti-fundamentalism, pluralism, and a degree of syncretism. Muhammadiyah, on the other hand, characterizes its approach as "*Islam Berkemajuan*" (Progressive Islam), focusing on reform and modernization.⁴⁰

NU has actively worked to recontextualize Islamic teachings for the modern world, demonstrating a proactive stance on religious

³⁷ Greenwalt, *Factsheet: Indonesia's Pancasila*.

³⁸ Taufik Ismail et al., *Analytical Comparative Study Of Application Of Islamic Law In Indonesia And Malaysia*, 2021.

³⁹ Ismail et al., *Analytical Comparative Study Of Application Of Islamic Law In Indonesia And Malaysia*.

⁴⁰ "History," *The Embassy of The Republic of Indonesia in Berlin*, n.d., accessed July 31, 2025, <https://indonesianembassy.de/history/>.

moderation. A significant development occurred in 2019 when NU issued an unprecedented ruling that officially abolished the legal category of *kafir* (infidel) for fellow citizens, asserting that all Indonesians, regardless of their religious beliefs, are equal citizens.⁴¹ This ruling also affirmed the theological legitimacy of the nation-state concept over a caliphate. NU promotes a comprehensive concept of universal fraternity, encompassing the fraternity of Muslims (*ukhuwwah islamiyyah*), the fraternity of those within a single nation (*ukhuwwah wataniyyah*), and the fraternity of all human beings (*ukhuwwah insaniyyah* or *ukhuwwah basyariyyah*). These efforts are part of a broader strategy to reconcile Islamic teachings with contemporary realities and foster a global civilization rooted in universal love and compassion.⁴²

Muhammadiyah contributes to the promotion of *Wasatiyyah* through its extensive network of charitable enterprises in formal education, health, and social work. The organization advocates for economic self-reliance, empowering small businesses, and has even proposed innovative ideas such as an "Islamic Coin" as a sharia-compliant digital currency. Muhammadiyah's historical approach to the Dutch colonial government, characterized by an accommodative yet resistant stance, exemplifies its *Wasatiyyah* role as a balancing force.⁴³

While state policies in Indonesia promote *Wasatiyyah* from the top-down, NU and Muhammadiyah provide a crucial bottom-up and horizontal dimension to religious moderation. Their long-standing engagement with local contexts and social issues, combined with their theological interpretations and vast organizational networks, lends authenticity and grassroots reach to the moderation discourse. This often enables them to fill gaps in state-centric narratives or even challenge them. The specific initiatives undertaken by these organizations, such as NU's abolition of the *kafir* category and

⁴¹ KH Yahya Cholil Staquf and C Holland Taylor, "The Civilizational Origins of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama and Its Humanitarian Islam Movement," *Hudson Institute* 22 (forthcoming).

⁴² Staquf and Taylor, "The Civilizational Origins of Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama and Its Humanitarian Islam Movement."

⁴³ Persyarikatan Muhammadiyah, "Muhammadiyah's Wasathiyah Strategy in the Struggle for Independence," News, *Muhammadiyah Official Website - English Version*, March 6, 2025, <https://en.muhammadiyah.or.id/muhammadiyahs-wasathiyah-strategy-in-the-struggle-for-independence/>.

Muhammadiyah's economic frameworks, demonstrate their proactive role in shaping moderation from within society, rather than merely reacting to government directives. This dual approach, combining state policy with robust civil society action, contributes to a more resilient and dynamic religious landscape in Indonesia.

Civil Society's Role in Resisting Politicization

Civil society organizations in Indonesia, including the influential Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, play a significant role in resisting the politicization of religion and actively promoting interfaith dialogue and tolerance.⁴⁴ These organizations often advocate for marginalized religious groups, such as Ahmadiyya and Shia communities, and challenge government policies that are perceived to restrict religious freedom or discriminate against minorities.⁴⁵ For instance, NU has strongly condemned attacks on Ahmadiyya mosques.⁴⁶ Initiatives like the Leimena Institute's cross-cultural religious literacy program aim to educate religious teachers on tolerance and interfaith understanding, reaching thousands of individuals.⁴⁷

Despite these efforts, some civil society organizations and scholars express discomfort when collaborating with the government on religious moderation initiatives. This discomfort stems from the perception that the concept of religious moderation, as promoted by the state, remains fluid and evolving, potentially serving as an instrument for ideological screening or a distraction from fundamental human rights issues.⁴⁸ Critics argue that the state's focus on moderating citizens' religious views may not address the root causes of conflict and could divert attention from the government's constitutional duty to uphold freedom of religion or belief for all citizens. The continued

⁴⁴ Amin, "Emergence Of Wasatiyyah Islam."

⁴⁵ Imam Rozikin et al., "Narrative Politics And The Limits Of Religious Governance In Decentralized Indonesia: The Case Of HKBP Maranatha In Cilegon, Indonesia," *Penamas* 38, no. 1 (2025): 393–408, <https://doi.org/10.31330/penamas.v38i1.830>.

⁴⁶ Muhammad Jailani et al., "The Wasathiyyah Political Movements of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah in North Sumatra Post-1998 Reform Era," *MUHARRIK: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Sosial* 7, no. 2 (2024): 205–16.

⁴⁷ Ismail et al., *Analytical Comparative Study Of Application Of Islamic Law In Indonesia And Malaysia*.

⁴⁸ M. Mukhibat et al., "Development And Evaluation Of Religious Moderation Education Curriculum At Higher Education In Indonesia," *Cogent Education* 11, no. 1 (2024): 2302308, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2302308>.

existence of blasphemy laws, which can be leveraged against minority groups, further highlights these tensions.⁴⁹

The active and sometimes critical role of Indonesian civil society, particularly that of major Islamic organizations, creates a dynamic and contested space for the discourse of *Wasatiyyah*. This robust engagement acts as a crucial check on the potential instrumentalization of religious moderation by the state, fostering a more genuine, albeit sometimes challenging, pluralism that allows for diverse interpretations and advocacy. This contrasts sharply with contexts where civil society autonomy is more restricted, demonstrating the significance of a vibrant non-state sector in shaping the narrative of moderation.

Table 2: Key *Wasatiyyah* Initiatives and Actors in Indonesia

Actor Type	Specific Actor	Key <i>Wasatiyyah</i> Initiatives/Programs	Core Principles Emphasized
State Agency	Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA)	" <i>Moderasi beragama</i> " policy, " <i>Kampung moderasi beragama</i> " program, short film festivals, curriculum integration in higher education, counselling and training programs	Humanity, consensus, public order, <i>tawassuth</i> (middle way), <i>tasamuh</i> (tolerance), <i>tawazun</i> (balance), <i>i'tidal</i> (fairness), national commitment, anti-violence, local culture accommodation ⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ismandianto, "Islamic Leadership and Political Engagement."

⁵⁰ *Tanya Jawab Moderasi Beragama*.

State Agency	National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT)	Deradicalization programs, community-based strategies, cross-sector collaboration to counter radicalism	Religious moderation as a countermeasure to radicalism, balance between security and civil rights ⁵¹
Semi-Governmental Body	Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI)	Issuance of fatwas, halal certification, Islamic counseling; partner to government on religious policy	Religious guidance, advocating for religious integrity, navigating political landscape ⁵²
Mass Organization	Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)	" <i>Islam Nusantara</i> " concept, abolition of <i>kafir</i> category (2019), affirmation of nation-state, promotion of <i>ukhuwwah islamiyyah</i> , <i>ukhuwwah wataniyyah</i> , <i>ukhuwwah insaniyyah</i> , "Humanitarian Islam" global movement	Moderation, anti-fundamentalism, pluralism, syncretism, universal fraternity, recontextualizing Islamic teachings for modern world ⁵³

⁵¹ Kuswana, "Digital Counter-Radicalism."

⁵² Dharta et al., "MUI's Fatwa on Interfaith Greetings and Religious Tolerance."

⁵³ Ubed Abdilah Syarif, "The Epistemic Discourse of Religious Moderation (Moderasi Beragama) in Indonesia," *Digital Press Social Sciences and Humanities* 11 (2024): 00014, <https://doi.org/10.29037/digitalpress.411466>.

Mass Organization	Muhammadiyah	<i>"Islam Berkemajuan"</i> concept, charitable enterprises (education, health, social work), economic self-reliance, "Islamic Coin" initiative, interfaith dialogue	Progressive Islam, reform, purification of religious practices, modernization, economic independence, fairness ⁵⁴
Civil Society Institute	Leimena Institute	Cross-cultural religious literacy programs for religious teachers, interfaith dialogue initiatives	Promoting understanding, tolerance, countering intolerance, human rights ⁵⁵

Malaysia: *Wasatiyyah* in a Centralized Context

Malaysia's approach to *Wasatiyyah* is characterized by a strong, centralized state apparatus that actively defines and disseminates a state-approved narrative of moderation, often intertwining it with national identity and the promotion of Sunni orthodoxy.

Institutionalization under the Prime Minister's Department for Islamic Affairs and JAKIM

The Malaysian government, operating under the Prime Minister's Department for Islamic Affairs, officially launched "*Wasatiyyah*" as a national slogan and approach in June 2011/2012.4 This initiative was primarily aimed at revitalizing the government's legitimacy, garnering support from Malay-Muslims, and actively countering religious extremism and Islamic resurgence at the national

⁵⁴ Syarif, "The Epistemic Discourse of Religious Moderation (Moderasi Beragama) in Indonesia."

⁵⁵ Ismail et al., *Analytical Comparative Study Of Application Of Islamic Law In Indonesia And Malaysia*.

level.⁵⁶ The *Wasatiyyah* approach is now integrated with the broader "*Malaysia Madani*" concept, a national framework designed to guide the nation's progress while adhering to Islamic values.⁵⁷

The *Wasatiyyah* Institute Malaysia, founded by the government in 2012, serves as a central platform for promoting moderation and harmony in Islam and combating terrorism and extremism. Its objectives include ensuring that the Malaysian populace understands and practices *Wasatiyyah* in their daily lives, promoting respect for democracy, rules, laws, and social justice. The institute organizes events, inviting religious scholars to educate and address aspects of religion perceived to be tainted by ideologies inconsistent with mainstream Islam.⁵⁸

The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) holds a powerful and central role in promoting *Wasatiyyah*. JAKIM actively disseminates the concept through seminars, lectures, and sermons, and is specifically tasked with curbing extremist ideologies, including among foreign workers.⁵⁹ JAKIM's influence is extensive, as it possesses significant regulatory authority over Islamic education, finance, and halal certification, indicating a highly integrated governmental function over religious affairs, in contrast to Indonesia's more advisory MUI.⁶⁰

Malaysia's approach to institutionalizing *Wasatiyyah* is characterized by a strong, centralized state apparatus that seeks to control and disseminate a state-approved narrative of moderation. This top-down control, while effective in countering overt extremism and ensuring a degree of ideological uniformity, carries the inherent risk of limiting the organic development of diverse interpretations of *Wasatiyyah*. Consequently, it may lead to the instrumentalization of the

⁵⁶ Mohammad Redzuan Othman and Mashitah Sulaiman, *Inculcating The Essence Of 'Wasatiyyah' In Muslim Society: The State Promotion And Muslim Intelligentsia Responses In Malaysia*, n.d.

⁵⁷ Suhaila Abdullah and Nur Izzaty Mohamad, *The Quranic Principle of Wasatiyyah as the Foundation of Malaysia Madani's Civilizational Framework*, 2 (forthcoming).

⁵⁸ Wikipedia, "Wasatiyyah Institute Malaysia," April 18, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wasatiyyah_Institute_Malaysia&oldid=1286216875.

⁵⁹ Othman and Sulaiman, *Inculcating The Essence Of 'Wasatiyyah' In Muslim Society: The State Promotion And Muslim Intelligentsia Responses In Malaysia*.

⁶⁰ Dharta et al., "MUI's Fatwa on Interfaith Greetings and Religious Tolerance."

concept for political legitimacy and social control, potentially suppressing dissenting views and limiting genuine religious discourse. The consistent governmental oversight and direct involvement in religious affairs, exemplified by the roles of the Prime Minister's Department and JAKIM, underscore this centralized model.

Promotion of State-Led Sunni Orthodoxy and Containment of Pluralist Movements

The Malaysian state's promotion of *Wasatiyyah* is closely linked to its efforts to reinforce state-led Sunni orthodoxy and contain religious pluralism. The Malaysian constitution explicitly defines ethnic Malays as Muslim and grants both federal and state governments significant power to control or restrict the propagation of religious doctrines among Muslims. This effectively promotes Sunni Islam above all other religious groups, including non-Sunni Islamic sects.⁶¹ Individuals who deviate from the official interpretation of Islam may face mandatory "rehabilitation" in state-approved centers or legal action.⁶²

JAKIM has explicitly categorized "liberalism and pluralism" as "radical ideologies which belittle the religion," indicating that the state's interpretation of *Wasatiyyah* extends beyond countering violent extremism to also containing interpretations or movements that are perceived to challenge state-sanctioned Sunni orthodoxy.⁶³ This suggests that "moderation" is defined within strict boundaries determined by the state.

Fatwas issued by the National Fatwa Council, which comprises state muftis and Islamic scholars, are legally binding for Muslims and can prohibit practices deemed to corrupt beliefs or violate Islam.⁶⁴ These fatwas often reflect a conservative interpretation of Islamic law, thereby limiting the practical implications of religious pluralism and contributing to legal ambiguities and social tensions, particularly

⁶¹ "MALAYSIA The Constitution Protects Freedom of Religion," State.gov, n.d., <https://my.usembassy.gov/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom-malaysia/>.

⁶² "Jakim's Anti-Christian Sermon Goes against Najib's Reconciliation Initiative – WHY IS THIS?," *World Interfaith Harmony Week*, February 18, 2014, <https://worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com/jakims-anti-christian-sermon-goes-against-najibs-reconciliation-initiative-why-is-this-2/>.

⁶³ Hazlin Hassan, "Malaysia's Most Powerful Islamic Body Faces Scrutiny," *Straits Times* 18 (2018).

⁶⁴ "MALAYSIA The Constitution Protects Freedom of Religion."

concerning interfaith engagements and conversions from Islam.⁶⁵ Converts from Islam face significant legal hurdles, as sharia courts rarely grant requests for apostasy, and penalties for apostasy vary by state, sometimes including fines, imprisonment, or caning.⁶⁶ The "Allah" usage dispute, where the Home Ministry banned non-Muslims from using the term, further illustrates the state's efforts to control religious discourse and identity.⁶⁷

In Malaysia, *Wasatiyyah* is instrumentalized not only as a tool for countering violent extremism but also as a mechanism for reinforcing state-led Sunni orthodoxy and containing religious pluralism. This application of "moderation" to define and enforce acceptable religious boundaries creates inherent tensions with universal principles of religious freedom and diversity. This approach risks alienating non-Sunni Muslims and other religious minorities, contributing to a less inclusive public discourse. The legal challenges faced by converts and non-Muslims exemplify how the state's controlled interpretation of *Wasatiyyah*, rather than fostering broad pluralism, is used to maintain a specific religious and ethnic hierarchy.

Challenges to Civil Society Autonomy

Civil society organizations in Malaysia, particularly those that are non-Sunni Islamic groups or advocate for broader religious freedom, face significant challenges to their autonomy and operational capacity. These challenges include difficulties in registering as non-profit charitable organizations or in constructing houses of worship, often compelling some groups to register as commercial companies to conduct their activities.⁶⁸ Furthermore, restrictive laws, such as the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012, can be employed to

⁶⁵ Ahmad Yumni Abu Bakar et al., "Fatwas On Religious Pluralism In Malaysia: A Literature Review Of Islamic Legal Perspectives," *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication* 10, no. 39 (2025): 97–114, <https://doi.org/10.35631/IJLGC.1039006>.

⁶⁶ U. S. Embassy Malaysia, "2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Malaysia," *U.S. Embassy in Malaysia*, June 27, 2024, <https://my.usembassy.gov/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom-malaysia/>.

⁶⁷ Administrator, "Identity Politics • Inside Story," *Inside Story*, January 20, 2010, <https://insidestory.org.au/identity-politics/>.

⁶⁸ "MALAYSIA The Constitution Protects Freedom of Religion."

control activism and suppress dissent, limiting the space for civil society to operate freely.⁶⁹

Concerns are prevalent regarding the increasing "Islamization" of politics, which is often fueled by sophisticated social media campaigns from conservative Islamic organizations that encourage youth to embrace more conservative interpretations of Islam.⁷⁰ Organizations advocating for religious pluralism, such as the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST), report difficulties in engaging with Muslim leaders for interfaith dialogue, creating a gap in cross-religious understanding. Moreover, the work of such councils is often under constant scrutiny, with leaders reportedly monitored by the police and facing threats of arrest for their activities.⁷¹

The challenges faced by civil society in Malaysia highlight the limitations on their autonomy in promoting religious moderation. The state's centralized control over religious affairs and its emphasis on a singular, state-sanctioned Sunni orthodoxy constrain the ability of independent organizations to foster diverse interpretations of moderation or advocate for genuine religious pluralism. This environment contrasts with Indonesia, where civil society, particularly major Islamic organizations, has greater space to operate and challenge state narratives, contributing to a more dynamic and, at times, contested religious landscape. The restrictive legal and political environment in Malaysia thus limits the capacity for bottom-up initiatives to significantly influence the broader discourse on religious moderation.

Table 3: Key *Wasatiyyah* Initiatives and Actors in Malaysia

Actor Type	Specific Actor	Key <i>Wasatiyyah</i> Initiatives/Programs	Core Principles Emphasized
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⁶⁹ "Malaysia Monitor Report," accessed July 31, 2025, <https://monitor.pluralism.ca/publication/malaysia/>.

⁷⁰ Malaysia, "2023 Report on International Religious Freedom."

⁷¹ "Navigating Pluralism in Malaysia: Insights and Challenges from Key Dialogues," accessed July 31, 2025, <https://monitor.pluralism.ca/article/navigating-pluralism-in-malaysia-insights-and-challenges-from-key-stakeholder-dialogues/>.

State Agency	Prime Minister's Department for Islamic Affairs	Official launch of "Wasatiyyah Approach" (2011/2012), integration with "Malaysia Madani" concept, Global Movement of the Moderates (GMM) initiative	Revitalizing legitimacy, countering extremism, promoting moderation and harmony, respect for democracy, rules, laws, social justice, balanced practice of Islam ⁷²
State-Founded Institute	<i>Wasatiyyah</i> Institute Malaysia	Promoting education and thinking based on <i>Wasatiyyah</i> concept, fending off extremism, organizing seminars and inviting scholars for reform ⁷³	Moderation, harmony, peace, respect for democracy, rules, laws, education, honor, pride, social justice ⁷⁴
State Agency	Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM)	Promoting <i>Wasatiyyah</i> through seminars, lectures, sermons; developing modules to curb extremism (e.g., among foreign workers); regulatory	Curbing radical ideologies, promoting true Islamic principles, balanced, fair, and diversity (as

⁷² Othman and Sulaiman, *Inculcating The Essence Of 'Wasatiyyah' In Muslim Society: The State Promotion And Muslim Intelligentsia Responses In Malaysia*.

⁷³ Wikipedia, "Wasatiyyah Institute Malaysia."

⁷⁴ Wikipedia, "Wasatiyyah Institute Malaysia."

		authority over Islamic education, finance, halal certification	defined by state orthodoxy) ⁷⁵
Religious Authority	National Fatwa Council (State Muftis)	Issuance of legally binding fatwas on various religious issues (e.g., prohibiting yoga, "tomboy" fatwa, Shia Islam as "deviant")	Maintaining Sunni orthodoxy, containing perceived deviations, limiting pluralism ⁷⁶
Civil Society Organizations (Challenges)	Various NGOs (e.g., MCCBCHST, Justice for Sisters, Pusat KOMAS)	Advocating for religious pluralism, human rights, anti-racism, gender issues; efforts to engage government on religious freedom	Promoting religious freedom, tolerance, diversity, challenging discrimination, but face registration difficulties, legal restrictions, and limited engagement with state-controlled Muslim bodies ⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Othman and Sulaiman, *Inculcating The Essence Of 'Wasatiyyah' In Muslim Society: The State Promotion And Muslim Intelligentsia Responses In Malaysia*.

⁷⁶ "MALAYSIA The Constitution Protects Freedom of Religion."

⁷⁷ "MALAYSIA The Constitution Protects Freedom of Religion."

Discussion: Comparative Analysis of Tensions and Dynamics Interpretation of Results: Religious Moderation as a Tool for Social Order and Legitimacy

The comparative analysis reveals that in both Indonesia and Malaysia, religious moderation, particularly through the lens of *Wasatiyyah*, is significantly shaped by the political need to maintain social order and legitimacy. In Indonesia, the "*Moderasi Beragama*" policy, spearheaded by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, is explicitly positioned as a national strategy to counter extremism and foster harmony within a diverse society.⁷⁸ This aligns with the Pancasila ideology, which serves as a unifying national framework.⁷⁹ The government seeks to legitimize its rule by presenting itself as the guardian of moderate Islam and national unity, especially in the face of rising identity politics.⁸⁰

Similarly, in Malaysia, the government's promotion of *Wasatiyyah*, initiated under the Prime Minister's Department for Islamic Affairs and institutionalized through bodies like JAKIM, aims to revitalize its legitimacy and secure support from the Malay-Muslim majority.⁸¹ The concept is used to project an image of a government that upholds true Islamic teachings while combating extremism.⁸² Both states leverage the theological appeal of *Wasatiyyah* to address internal challenges and project a favorable image internationally. The common thread is the instrumentalization of a religious concept to serve political ends, emphasizing stability and state authority.

Thematic Insights: Universal Ethics vs. Nation-State Interests

A fundamental tension emerges between the universal ethical principles inherent in *Wasatiyyah* and the specific interests of the

⁷⁸ Tinambunan et al., "Implication Abu Dhabi Document."

⁷⁹ Greenwalt, *Factsheet: Indonesia's Pancasila*.

⁸⁰ Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir et al., "Identity Politics: Mobilising Religious Sentiment In Democratic Indonesia," *Indonesia at Melbourne*, n.d., accessed July 31, 2025, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/identity-politics-mobilising-religious-sentiment-in-democratic-indonesia/>.

⁸¹ Othman and Sulaiman, *Inculcating The Essence Of 'Wasatiyyah' In Muslim Society: The State Promotion And Muslim Intelligentsia Responses In Malaysia*.

⁸² "Govt Rejects Extremism, Tackles Radicalism Among Foreign Workers, Says Minister | The Star," accessed July 31, 2025, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2025/07/04/govt-rejects-extremism-tackles-radicalism-among-foreign-workers-says-minister>.

nation-state. The theological foundations of *Wasatiyyah* emphasize justice, balance, mutual recognition, and cooperation, transcending narrow communal or national boundaries.⁸³ However, when adopted by state apparatuses, these universal principles are often reinterpreted or selectively applied to align with nationalistic agendas, political stability, and the maintenance of existing power structures.

In Indonesia, while Pancasila broadly promotes diversity, its implementation can prioritize tolerance among officially recognized religions, potentially marginalizing other groups or failing to address underlying legal issues that impinge on religious freedom.⁸⁴ This suggests that the state's vision of moderation is constrained by its own definitions of acceptable religious expression. In Malaysia, this tension is even more pronounced, where *Wasatiyyah* is explicitly used to reinforce state-led Sunni orthodoxy and contain pluralist movements, effectively narrowing the scope of religious freedom for non-Sunni Muslims and other minorities.⁸⁵ This demonstrates how a universal ethic can be adapted to serve the specific interests of a dominant religious-ethnic identity within a nation-state framework. The pursuit of national unity and social order, while legitimate goals, can sometimes overshadow the broader ethical demands of genuine pluralism and religious freedom.

The Potential and Limits of *Wasatiyyah* as a Unifying Public Discourse

Wasatiyyah holds significant potential as a unifying public discourse, given its emphasis on shared values like justice, tolerance, and balance, which resonate across diverse communities.⁸⁶ In Indonesia, the robust engagement of mass organizations like NU and Muhammadiyah, with their grassroots reach and independent theological interpretations, provides a strong foundation for a more authentic and inclusive moderation narrative.⁸⁷ Their ability to challenge state-centric views and advocate for marginalized groups allows *Wasatiyyah* to function as a dynamic, rather than static, concept

⁸³ Kamali, "The Indications of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

⁸⁴ Ismail et al., *Analytical Comparative Study Of Application Of Islamic Law In Indonesia And Malaysia*.

⁸⁵ "MALAYSIA The Constitution Protects Freedom of Religion."

⁸⁶ Kamali, "The Indications of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

⁸⁷ "History."

in public discourse. This bottom-up influence strengthens its potential to genuinely unify diverse segments of society by fostering mutual understanding and respect for differences.

However, the limits of *Wasatiyyah* as a unifying discourse become apparent when it is instrumentalized for political ends or becomes entangled with identity politics. In both countries, the concept is used to counter extremism, yet it can simultaneously contribute to polarization by defining who is "moderate" and who is "extreme" based on state-approved interpretations.⁸⁸ In Malaysia, the explicit targeting of "liberalism and pluralism" by state religious bodies under the guise of *Wasatiyyah* limits its capacity to foster genuine inter-religious harmony, as it actively seeks to contain diverse expressions of faith.⁸⁹ When *Wasatiyyah* is co-opted to serve specific nationalist or majoritarian interests, it risks losing its universal appeal and becoming another tool in the struggle for political power, thereby undermining its potential to truly unify a pluralistic society. The challenge lies in preventing its transformation from a universal ethical principle into a political slogan.

The Risks of Instrumentalizing Islamic Moderation for Political Ends

The instrumentalization of *Wasatiyyah* for political ends carries significant risks. When religious moderation becomes a state project, it can be used to justify policies that, while ostensibly promoting harmony, may in practice limit religious freedom or suppress dissenting voices. In Indonesia, critics argue that the "*Moderasi beragama*" policy, despite its positive aims, risks becoming a tool for ideological screening, potentially marginalizing groups that do not conform to the state's definition of moderation. The continued application of blasphemy laws, even as the state promotes moderation, highlights this incongruity, as these laws can be used to target religious minorities.⁹⁰

In Malaysia, the risks are even more pronounced due to the centralized nature of Islamic institutions and the close link between Malay ethnicity and Islam. The state's promotion of *Wasatiyyah* is interwoven with the objective of reinforcing Sunni orthodoxy and

⁸⁸ Amin, "Emergence Of Wasatiyyah Islam."

⁸⁹ Hassan, "Malaysia's Most Powerful Islamic Body Faces Scrutiny."

⁹⁰ Ismandianto, "Islamic Leadership and Political Engagement."

containing any perceived threats from pluralist or liberal interpretations.⁹¹ This leads to a situation where "moderation" is used to justify restrictions on religious freedom for non-Sunni Muslims and other minorities, as seen in the difficulties faced by religious groups in registering or building places of worship.⁹² When *Wasatiyyah* is instrumentalized to maintain a specific religious-ethnic hierarchy, it can exacerbate social tensions, foster resentment among marginalized groups, and ultimately undermine the very pluralism it claims to protect. The politicization of religious identity, as observed in both countries, turns *Wasatiyyah* into a tool for electoral gain or power consolidation, rather than a genuine ethical framework for coexistence.⁹³

Scholarly Critiques of Instrumentalization

Scholars in both Indonesia and Malaysia have voiced critiques regarding the instrumentalization of *Wasatiyyah* by state actors. In Indonesia, some scholars and civil society organizations express discomfort with the government's "*Moderasi beragama*" policy, perceiving it as a potential instrument for ideological screening rather than a genuine effort to foster religious freedom.⁹⁴ Critics argue that the policy's focus on moderating citizens' religious views may not address the root causes of religious conflict and could distract from the state's constitutional duty to uphold freedom of religion or belief for all. The continued existence of blasphemy laws and the marginalization of smaller religious groups under the state's recognized religious framework are cited as examples of the policy's shortcomings. There is concern that the policy could become a "soft power strategy" for the government to define an Indonesian religious standard, potentially limiting diverse interpretations of Islam.⁹⁵

In Malaysia, critiques from scholars and religious leaders often center on the comprehensive and authentic implementation of *Wasatiyyah* in line with Islamic law, and the potential for

⁹¹ Hassan, "Malaysia's Most Powerful Islamic Body Faces Scrutiny."

⁹² "MALAYSIA The Constitution Protects Freedom of Religion."

⁹³ "The Politics of Religious Moderation: A Critical Review," accessed July 31, 2025, <https://www.icrs.or.id/news/the-politics-of-religious-moderation-a-critical-review>.

⁹⁴ Mukhibat et al., "Development And Evaluation Of Religious Moderation Education Curriculum At Higher Education In Indonesia."

⁹⁵ Ismandianto, "Islamic Leadership and Political Engagement."

misinterpretation of "moderation" when state-led. Some argue that the state's promotion of *Wasatiyyah* is a political campaign to popularize the concept and strengthen the ruling party's role against traditional competitors like the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS).⁹⁶ Critics, such as Abdul Hadi Awang (President of PAS), emphasize that *Wasatiyyah* must be strictly bounded by Islamic policy and should not imply a "patchwork" or diluted practice of Islam. Concerns have also been raised that the state's definition of *Wasatiyyah*, particularly as interpreted by JAKIM, may incorrectly imply a "middle ground" between good and bad faiths, or that it is used to justify restrictions on pluralism under the guise of protecting Islam from "liberalism".⁹⁷ These critiques highlight the ongoing debate within academic and religious circles about the true spirit of *Wasatiyyah* versus its political application.

Table 4: Comparative Summary of *Wasatiyyah* Narratives and Challenges

Feature	Indonesia	Malaysia
Socio-Political Context	Democracy, decentralized religious authority, diverse civil society ⁹⁸	Semi-authoritarian, centralized Islamic institutions, limited civil society autonomy ⁹⁹
State Promotion Mechanism	Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) " <i>Moderasi beragama</i> " policy; BNPT for deradicalization ¹⁰⁰	Prime Minister's Department for Islamic Affairs; <i>Wasatiyyah</i>

⁹⁶ Othman and Sulaiman, *Inculcating The Essence Of 'Wasatiyyah' In Muslim Society: The State Promotion And Muslim Intelligentsia Responses In Malaysia*.

⁹⁷ Mazlan Ibrahim et al., "Wasatiyyah Discourse According to Muslim Scholars in Malaysia," *Advances in Natural and Applied Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2013): 6–14.

⁹⁸ Bahri et al., "Religious Moderation Education."

⁹⁹ Dharta et al., "MUI's Fatwa on Interfaith Greetings and Religious Tolerance."

¹⁰⁰ Tinambunan et al., "Implication Abu Dhabi Document."

		Institute Malaysia; JAKIM ¹⁰¹
Alignment with National Ideology	Deeply aligned with Pancasila as unifying national philosophy ¹⁰²	Aligned with " <i>Malaysia Madani</i> " for national development; reinforces Malay-Muslim identity ¹⁰³
Role of Major Islamic Organizations	Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah are key, independent proponents with grassroots influence; interpret <i>Wasatiyyah</i> as " <i>Islam Nusantara</i> " and " <i>Islam Berkemajuan</i> " ¹⁰⁴	Less prominent independent role; state-controlled Islamic bodies (JAKIM, Fatwa Council) dominate interpretation and dissemination ¹⁰⁵
Civil Society Autonomy & Influence	Strong role in resisting politicization, advocating for minorities; robust interfaith dialogue. ¹⁰⁶	Limited autonomy due to legal restrictions, registration difficulties; challenges in interfaith dialogue with state-controlled Muslim bodies ¹⁰⁷
Intersection with Identity Politics	Politicization of religious identity during elections (e.g., Jakarta gubernatorial election); can lead to	Conflation of Malay ethnicity and Islam; exclusionary populism blaming "others";

¹⁰¹ Othman and Sulaiman, *Inculcating The Essence Of 'Wasatiyyah' In Muslim Society: The State Promotion And Muslim Intelligentsia Responses In Malaysia*.

¹⁰² "History."

¹⁰³ Abdullah and Mohamad, *The Quranic Principle of Wasatiyyah as the Foundation of Malaysia Madani's Civilizational Framework*.

¹⁰⁴ "History."

¹⁰⁵ Dharta et al., "MUI's Fatwa on Interfaith Greetings and Religious Tolerance."

¹⁰⁶ Amin, "Emergence Of Wasatiyyah Islam."

¹⁰⁷ "MALAYSIA The Constitution Protects Freedom of Religion."

	polarization but also counter-mobilization by moderate groups ¹⁰⁸	instrumentalization to reinforce state-led Sunni orthodoxy ¹⁰⁹
Challenges/Critiques of State Approach	Perceived as top-down, "Muslim-bias," ideological screening; tension with freedom of religion/expression; blasphemy laws ¹¹⁰	Instrumentalization to promote Sunni orthodoxy and contain pluralism; suppression of non-Sunni Islam; restrictions on religious freedom; limited space for diverse interpretations ¹¹¹

Conclusion

Summary of How *Wasatiyyah* Islam is Used and Contested in Malaysia and Indonesia

The comparative study of *Wasatiyyah* Islam narratives in Malaysia and Indonesia reveals a complex interplay between theological ideals and political realities. In both Muslim-majority nations, *Wasatiyyah*, rooted in the Qur'anic concept of the "middle path" and embodying principles of justice, balance, and tolerance, has been actively promoted by the state as a counter-narrative to rising religious extremism and radicalism.¹¹²

Indonesia, characterized by a democratic system and decentralized religious authority, has institutionalized *Wasatiyyah* through its "*Moderasi beragama*" policy, spearheaded by the Ministry

¹⁰⁸ Dwiki Nur Halimi et al., "Challenges Of Religion and Identity Politics In Indonesia: The Role Of Islamic Religious Education," *IJGIE (International Journal of Graduate of Islamic Education)* 6, no. 2 (2025): 294–305, <https://doi.org/10.37567/ijgie.v6i2.3887>.

¹⁰⁹ Emanuela Mangiarotti, "Malaysia 2023: A Reform Agenda Overshadowed by Identity Politics," *Asia Maior* 34 (2023).

¹¹⁰ Mukhibat et al., "Development And Evaluation Of Religious Moderation Education Curriculum At Higher Education In Indonesia."

¹¹¹ Othman and Sulaiman, *Inculcating The Essence Of 'Wasatiyyah' In Muslim Society: The State Promotion And Muslim Intelligentsia Responses In Malaysia*.

¹¹² Kamali, "The Indicatio of Wasatiyyah or Moderation in Islam."

of Religious Affairs and aligned with the national ideology of Pancasila.¹¹³ This approach is significantly bolstered by influential mass organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, which interpret and promote moderation from the grassroots, often challenging or complementing state narratives.¹¹⁴ Indonesian civil society plays a robust role in resisting the politicization of religion and advocating for religious pluralism, even while expressing concerns about the state's instrumentalization of moderation.¹¹⁵

In contrast, Malaysia, a semi-authoritarian state with centralized Islamic institutions, has promoted *Wasatiyyah* through the Prime Minister's Department for Islamic Affairs and powerful bodies like JAKIM. Here, *Wasatiyyah* is often instrumentalized to reinforce state-led Sunni orthodoxy and contain pluralist movements, aligning with a national identity that closely links Malay ethnicity with Islam.¹¹⁶ Civil society in Malaysia faces significant limitations in its autonomy, encountering legal and institutional barriers that restrict its capacity to advocate for broader religious freedom and diverse interpretations of Islam.¹¹⁷

The varying socio-political contexts profoundly shape the implementation and contestation of *Wasatiyyah*. While Indonesia's decentralized approach allows for a more dynamic and contested, yet arguably more authentic, pluralism, Malaysia's centralized control tends to enforce a narrower, state-sanctioned version of moderation, often at the expense of genuine religious diversity.

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¹¹³ Tinambunan et al., "Implication Abu Dhabi Document."

¹¹⁴ "History."

¹¹⁵ Mukhibat et al., "Development And Evaluation Of Religious Moderation Education Curriculum At Higher Education In Indonesia."

¹¹⁶ "MALAYSIA The Constitution Protects Freedom of Religion."

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