

Comparative Analysis of the Concept of 'Religious Moderation' in the Indonesian and Malaysian PAI Curriculum: A Document-Based Education Policy Study

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Article Info	ABSTRAK
Article History: Received 20-05-2025 Revised 09-06-2025 Accepted 21-06-2025 Keywords: Religious Moderation Islamic Education, Indonesia - Malaysia, Comparative Analysis, Education Policy,	Penelitian ini menganalisis secara komparatif representasi konsep moderasi beragama dalam kebijakan pendidikan dan dokumen kurikulum Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) di Indonesia dan Malaysia. Dilatarbelakangi oleh tantangan ekstremisme agama dan polarisasi sosial di Asia Tenggara, studi ini menegaskan urgensi penanaman nilai-nilai moderasi. PAI, sebagai instrumen formatif utama bagi generasi Muslim di kedua negara, memikul tanggung jawab krusial ini. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif komparatif dengan analisis kebijakan dan studi dokumen kurikulum, temuan menunjukkan perbedaan fundamental: Indonesia menekankan moderasi berbasis kohesi sosial dan ideologi Pancasila, sementara Malaysia mengintegrasikan konsep Wasatiyyah dengan pendekatan yang lebih teosentris. Perbedaan strategi integrasi nilai toleransi dan anti-radikalisme dalam materi pembelajaran juga teridentifikasi. Signifikansi penelitian terletak pada kontribusinya terhadap pengembangan model kurikulum PAI inklusif serta penguatan kerangka kebijakan pendidikan agama di negara mayoritas Muslim, dengan implikasi berupa rekomendasi untuk pertukaran praktik terbaik dan kolaborasi regional.
Copyright © 2025, The Author(s). This is an open access article under the CC-BY-SA license 	ABSTRACT <i>This study comparatively analyzes the representation of the concept of religious moderation in education policies and Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum documents in Indonesia and Malaysia. Motivated by the challenges of religious extremism and social polarization in Southeast Asia, this study emphasizes the urgency of instilling the values of moderation. The PAI, as the primary formative instrument for generations of Muslims in both countries, bears this crucial responsibility. Using a comparative qualitative approach with policy analysis and curriculum document studies, the findings show fundamental differences: Indonesia emphasizes moderation based on social cohesion and the ideology of Pancasila, while Malaysia integrates the concept of Wasatiyyah with a more theocentric approach. Differences in the strategies for integrating tolerance and anti-radicalism values in learning materials were also identified. The significance of the research lies in its contribution to the development of an inclusive PAI curriculum model as well as the strengthening of religious education policy frameworks in Muslim-majority countries, with implications in the form of recommendations for best practice exchange and regional collaboration.</i>
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INTRODUCTION

In the midst of global turmoil marked by religious radicalism and social fragmentation, the concept of religious moderation has emerged as a critical paradigm in contemporary Islamic educational discourse. This phenomenon is no longer a latent threat, but a reality that requires strategic intervention, especially in the educational environment. The UNESCO report (2022) specifically noted a significant increase, namely 23%, of incidents of religion-based intolerance in the Southeast Asian education environment in the last five years. This data sharply emphasizes the inevitable urgency to systematically integrate the values of moderation into every line of the educational curriculum (Azhari & Said, 2024; UNESCO, 2022).

Indonesia and Malaysia, as the two entities with the largest Muslim populations in the Southeast Asian region, are at the forefront of facing this challenge. Both have unique and complex socio-political

dynamics: Indonesia is known for its remarkable religious and ethnic diversity, reflected in the motto "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika", while Malaysia grapples with the dynamics of a multiethnic community that requires a balance between national identity and group distinctiveness (Nisa, 2023; Osman & Ali, 2023). In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is not only seen as an ordinary subject, but as a vital strategic pillar in the formation of students' character and worldview. This is explicitly reflected in the legal framework of education in both countries, namely the Indonesian National Education System Law (Sisdiknas) No. 20/2003 and the Malaysian Education Act 1996, which mandates the crucial role of PAI in shaping the young generation who are not only religiously knowledgeable, but also noble and moderate in character (Dewi & Hidayat, 2021; Rahman & Aziz, 2020).

Conceptually, the foundation of this understanding of moderation is rooted in the principle of Wasatiyyah (moderation) in Islam, a fundamental principle that comes directly from the Qur'an, as affirmed in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 143 which states Muslims as the "middle ummah" (*ummatah wasa'atan*). The meaning of "middle" here does not refer to a weak or gray position, but to balance, justice, and the best way to avoid extremity. According to Kamali (2021), Wasatiyyah is not just a passive compromise that sacrifices principles, but a dynamic balance between steadfastness to the main teachings (*ushul*) and contextual flexibility (*furu'*). It is an approach that promotes fairness, tolerance, and avoids excessive or over-the-top attitudes in all aspects of life (Al-Hassani, 2020). In a sociological and educational perspective, religious moderation encompasses three crucial dimensions: theological (inclusive interpretation), social (recognition of diversity), and political/practical (anti-extremism) (Bakar, 2023; Nurhayati & Fauzi, 2023). Recent developments have expanded this concept of Wasatiyyah into a specific educational framework, institutionalized in Indonesia as "religious moderation" and in Malaysia as a "Wasatiyyah approach" (Aminuddin & Ismail, 2022; Fitri & Yanti, 2024). PAI, as a strategic instrument, serves a dual function: as a shaper of religious identity and an agent of socialization of national values (Zamhari et al., 2022; Effendi & Huda, 2024). An analysis by Rahim (2023) of the global PAI curriculum shows a trend from a rigid doctrinal approach to a more relevant contextual approach, a dynamic that is essential in moderation integration efforts. In Indonesia, PAI has become an instrument of national integration based on Pancasila (Suryana & Abdullah, 2020; Harun & Syarifuddin, 2023), while in Malaysia it plays a role in strengthening the Islamic-Malay identity in a multicultural framework (Abdullah & Embong, 2020; Mohd & Omar, 2021).

Policy responses to the need for religious moderation have been manifested in various initiatives in both countries. In Indonesia, the Ministry of Religious Affairs proactively launched the "Strengthening Religious Moderation" program (2020-2024), an ambitious initiative that targets a comprehensive transformation of the PAI curriculum (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020; Mujab & Fitriani, 2022). On the contrary, Malaysia has adopted and consistently internalized the Wasatiyyah framework through the central role of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) in compiling the Islamic Education Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document (DSKP) (Asyraf & Rahman, 2021; Hamid & Mohamad, 2023). To analyze these policies, this study adopts a critical policy analysis approach (Taylor, 2021), which views curriculum documents as not neutral, but rather ideological artifacts that actively reproduce dominant values and reveal hidden power relations (Liasidou & Symeou, 2024; Fairclough, 2020). Challenges in comparative studies of education, particularly regarding the issue of conceptual equality arising from differences in cultural, political, and historical contexts (Bray & Adamson, 2022; Crossley & Lim, 2023), will be addressed with a thematic comparative approach (Bray & Adamson, 2022). This approach allows for the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences across countries by focusing on the specific issue of religious moderation as the central theme of the analysis.

Although efforts to integrate religious moderation into the PAI curriculum have been initiated—including in the Independent Curriculum in Indonesia through the dimension of "Pancasila Student Profile" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021; Darmawan & Susanto, 2023) and in Malaysia through the subjects "Akhlak" and "Islamic Tasawwur" (JAKIM, 2020; Jamil & Hashim, 2022)—in-depth comparative studies on the implementation of this concept in the curriculum documents of the two countries are still very limited. Previous research (Azra, 2020; Hassan, 2021) tends to focus on the theological aspects of moderation without an in-depth exploration of the representation of curriculum policies. This gap is exacerbated by the lack of studies comparing the approaches of the two countries post-COVID-19 pandemic, a period in which the issue of religious polarization has accelerated and strengthened digitally (Sukmawati et al., 2024; Hanif & Sari, 2023). This digital dynamic has created a new arena for the spread

of extreme ideologies, so curriculum analysis must take into account this contemporary context. Azizan et al. (2023) have exposed the inconsistencies in the implementation of the Wasatiyyah module in Malaysia, showing that there is a gap between policies on paper and practice on the ground. Meanwhile, Fata et al. (2024) criticized the tendency to securitize moderation—that is, attribute it solely to anti-terrorism issues—in PAI textbooks in Indonesia, raising questions about whether moderation is taught as an inherent value or simply as a security response.

Based on this comprehensive background and integrated literature review, this study seeks to fill these gaps by answering three key questions: How is the concept of religious moderation operationally defined and articulated in educational policies and PAI curriculum documents in Indonesia and Malaysia? What are the strategic similarities and differences in the integration of religious moderation values into the curriculum structure and learning materials of PAI in the two countries? And how do socio-historical and political factors unique to each country significantly influence the narrative and representation of religious moderation in their PAI curriculum documents? By answering these questions, this research is expected to make a substantive contribution to a comparative understanding of how two major Muslim countries in Southeast Asia seek to instill the values of moderation through their religious education systems.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative comparative study design with the main approach of policy document analysis. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth investigation of how abstract concepts such as religious moderation are articulated, framed, and integrated in formal policies and curriculum materials that have been institutionalized (Taylor, 2021; Liasidou & Symeou, 2024). The focus of the analysis is the representation of the concept of religious moderation at two levels of policy documents: (1) macro policies, which include laws, ministerial regulations, director-general decisions, and implementation guidelines at the national level; and (2) operational curriculum documents, including syllabus, student textbooks, and teacher guides used in the field. The analysis at these two levels provides a comprehensive picture from the level of policy idealization to instructional implementation.

The primary data sources of this study include official documents published by educational and religious authorities in both countries, with publication criteria between 2020 and 2025 to ensure relevance to current policies and discourses. For Indonesia, the documents analyzed include:

- The Guidelines for Strengthening Religious Moderation published by the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia (Kemenag, 2020), which is the main policy document.
- Learning Outcomes (CP) Phase E (SMA) Islamic Religious Education and Ethics (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022), which outlines the objectives and learning standards of PAI at the upper secondary level.
- Several series of PAI textbooks for junior high school / MTs and high school / MA levels published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs are concrete manifestations of the curriculum in the classroom.

For Malaysia, primary data sources include:

- Islamic Education Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document (DSKP) for Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR) and Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM) (JAKIM, 2020), which is a core curriculum guide.
- The Wasatiyyah module is published by JAKIM or a related institution, which is specifically designed to internalize the values of moderation.
- Several series of Islamic Education textbooks for secondary levels are published by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) or officially recognized publishers.

Data collection is carried out through a systematic stage. First, we identify and search for official documents through the online portal of the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia (Indonesia) and the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM). Second, relevant documents are selected based on the publication criteria for the 2020-2025 period to ensure the current of the policy. Third, the documents are classified based on educational level (elementary/primary school, junior high/junior high school, high school/high school) to facilitate structured comparative analysis.

The data analysis technique adopts the thematic content analysis model developed by Braun & Clarke (2022). This approach allows researchers to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) in qualitative data. The coding process is carried out iteratively, starting with repeated reading of the document to gain a thorough understanding, followed by initial coding of relevant text segments. These

codes are then grouped into broader and coherent themes. Five main categories are used as thematic guides for coding:

- **Conceptual Definition of Religious Moderation:** How the concept of "religious moderation" or "Wasatiyyah" is explicitly or implicitly defined in the document.
- **Integrated Core Values:** Specific values (e.g. tolerance, justice, non-violence, national commitment, pluralism, obedience) that are emphasized as part of moderation.
- **Pedagogical Strategy:** Methods or approaches proposed in the curriculum to instill the values of moderation (e.g. transversal integration, specialized modules, collaborative projects, memorization).
- **Narrative Representation in Examples and Illustrations:** How religious moderation is portrayed through examples of cases, stories, illustrations, or gender/minority roles presented in textbooks.
- **Contextual Responses to Local Issues:** How religious moderation is linked to specific social, political, and cultural challenges or characteristics in each country.

The validity of the research results is guaranteed through source triangulation and researcher triangulation. Source triangulation involves cross-referencing findings from different types of documents (national policies, syllabus, textbooks) to ensure consistency and mutual support. The researcher's triangulation was carried out through discussion and verification of the codification process and interpretation of the theme with Islamic education experts and qualitative methodologies, thereby minimizing the subjective bias of the researcher. However, it is important to recognize that the main limitation of this study lies in its purely document analysis nature without involving classroom observation of implementation or teacher/student perception. Therefore, the findings are textual and ideal representations as mandated in the document.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents key findings from a comparative analysis of PAI policy and curriculum documents in Indonesia and Malaysia, focusing on five thematic categories that have been defined, providing substantial detail to support the argument.

1. Definition and Conceptual Emphasis on Religious Moderation

An in-depth analysis of the document shows that the definition and conceptual emphasis of religious moderation in Indonesia and Malaysia, although they have a similar end goal i.e. the formation of a moderate individual are built on fundamentally different philosophical foundations and legitimacy. These differences reflect the socio-political and historical context of each country.

In Indonesia, the Guidelines for Strengthening Religious Moderation (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020) explicitly defines religious moderation as "a religious paradigm that emphasizes a balance between theological exclusivity (belief in one's own religious truth) and social inclusivity (recognition and respect for the existence and rights of adherents of other religions)". This definition expressly places moderation within the framework of four main pillars: (1) anti-violence, which rejects not only physical extremism but also hate speech and discrimination; (2) accommodating to local culture, which encourages harmonization between Islamic teachings and local wisdom as well as cultural practices that do not conflict with sharia; (3) national commitment, which expressly binds religious identity with loyalty to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) and the ideology of Pancasila as the philosophical basis of the state; and (4) tolerance, which includes mutual respect for differences in religious beliefs and practices (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020; Mujab & Fitriani, 2022). The emphasis on national commitment and Pancasila is very strong, making religious moderation in Indonesia a systematic effort to internalize national values through religious channels. PAI textbooks consistently include special sections on how Islamic teachings support Pancasila values, such as social justice, unity, and humanity, and even provide actual examples from the nation's history (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022a, PAI Class X Student Book). It shows moderation as an integral part of the nation-state narrative.

On the other hand, Malaysia through the Islamic Education Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document (DSKP) (JAKIM, 2020) emphasizes the concept of Wasatiyyah as "a middle ground between liberal and conservative extremism". Wasatiyyah here is understood as a balanced, fair, and proportionate approach in all aspects of Muslim life, based on the principles of Maqasid Syariah (the noble goals of Islamic law), namely maintaining religion, soul, intellect, lineage, and property (JAKIM, 2020; Hamid & Mohamad, 2023). This conceptualization is more rooted in the traditional Islamic theological-judicial

framework. The fundamental difference lies in the basis of legitimacy: Indonesia explicitly links moderation to the values of Pancasila as a state ideology that is pluralistic and inclusive of all recognized religions. This reflects the effort to make religion the glue of nationality in the context of a very pluralistic society. Meanwhile, Malaysia refers to more centralistic and hierarchical religious authorities, namely JAKIM, the National Fatwa Council, and other official Islamic institutions, which are based on the interpretation of Sunni Islam (Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah) as the official religion of the federation (Osman & Ali, 2023; Aminuddin & Ismail, 2022). Thus, the concept of moderation in Malaysia is more theocentric and firmly rooted in Islamic orthodoxy recognized and administered by the state, with a focus on adherence to official teachings and interpretations.

2. Key Values Emphasized

Despite differences in legitimacy and conceptual emphasis, the two countries show similarities in their emphasis on certain core values, especially tolerance (*tasamuh*) and anti-radicalism. However, the nuances and scope of the supporting values show significant divergence, reflecting the national priorities and social contexts of each.

Indonesia's curriculum consistently includes the "spirit of diversity" and "gender justice" as core values that are integrated in religious moderation. For example, PAI class XI material contains the topic of "Islam and Multiculturalism" which explicitly discusses the importance of respecting local traditions, ethnicities, and religious diversity as part of the Islamic teachings that are *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. This discussion is not only descriptive but also encourages an analysis of why diversity is a strength and how Islam supports it. Discussions on women's rights and equality, including in public and domestic roles, have also begun to be raised as part of moderation, challenging rigid patriarchal interpretations and encouraging a more inclusive understanding of Islam (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023, PAI Student Book Class XI; Dewi & Hidayat, 2021; Utami & Lestari, 2023). A very significant finding is linguistic inclusivity in Indonesia which consistently uses the term "other religions" when referring to non-Muslims. This phrase indicates the recognition of their religious status as an equal entity in the context of citizenship, promoting dialogue and cooperation between religious communities.

On the other hand, the Malaysian curriculum tends to be more dominant in emphasizing the value of "obedience to the government" (obedience to the leader or *Ulil Amri*) as an integral part of *Wasatiyyah*, especially in the *Akhlaq* module of junior high school (JAKIM, 2021; Ismail & Abdullah, 2024). This emphasis reflects the priority on political stability, social order, and obedience to legitimate authority within the framework of the state. In addition, the value of "limits of interaction with non-Muslims" is also more prominent, which can be interpreted as an attempt to maintain a distinctive and uneroded Muslim identity in a multiethnic society without being exclusive or hindering harmonious coexistence. This is often translated as "respecting but not fully integrating in religious rituals." The phrase used by Malaysia is "non-Muslims" or "other peoples" rather than "people of other religions", which subtly shows the difference in approach to recognizing minority religious entities. This linguistic difference is not just a choice of words, but a reflection of the underlying philosophy of interreligious relations in the two countries. Indonesia tends to promote more open and substantive religious pluralism, while Malaysia emphasizes procedural coexistence within the framework of the dominant Islamic-Malay identity (Mohd & Omar, 2021; Rahman & Hassan, 2023).

3. Integration Strategies in Curriculum and Learning Materials

Pedagogical strategies for integrating the values of moderation also differ significantly between the two countries, reflecting differences in their curriculum philosophy and educational goals as well as their approach to social issues.

Indonesia adopts a cross-curricular integration model in all subjects through the project "Strengthening the Profile of Pancasila Students" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). This means that the values of religious moderation are not only taught in PAI lessons, but are also organically integrated in other subjects such as History (e.g., discussing the acculturation of Islamic culture with local culture), Pancasila and Citizenship Education (PPKn), or even cross-disciplinary projects that promote social problem-solving. A concrete example is the activity of "dissecting the MUI fatwa on respect for followers of other religions" proposed in high school textbooks, encouraging students to conduct critical analysis of contemporary issues from a moderate perspective and think independently (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022a, PAI Class X Student Book). This strategy aims to shape the character of students holistically, where moderation becomes an integral part of their personality in various life contexts.

This approach inherently encourages reflective and participatory pedagogy, such as group discussions, case studies, conflict resolution simulations, and cross-faith collaboration projects, which allow students to internalize the values of moderation through hands-on experience, critical dialogue, and real-world problem-solving (Darmawan & Susanto, 2023; Wulandari & Setiawan, 2024).

Instead, Malaysia opted for a more focused compartmentalization approach. Wasatiyyah material is often taught through separate "Wasatiyyah Modules" or special topics such as "Simplicity in Religion" in the subjects of Islamic Tasawwur and Akhlaq (JAKIM, 2020; Azizan et al., 2023). Although this module provides an intensive focus on Wasatiyyah, it tends to limit its discussion to specific material frameworks and is sometimes less integrated across curriculums. This could be due to a more centralised curriculum structure and a desire to ensure a uniform message. Pedagogical differences are also evident in the evaluation. Worksheets in Malaysia place more emphasis on memorizing the Wasatiyyah definition and related concepts, such as the types of extremism or the characteristics of moderation, often through multiple-choice questions or short fill-in. This shows a preference for a cognitive-informative approach that prioritizes the mastery of formal concepts. Meanwhile, the assessment rubric in Indonesia assesses more interfaith collaboration projects, the ability to argue tolerantly, or participation in social activities that support harmony, which reflects an emphasis on affective, psychomotor, and social skills dimensions (Fitri & Yanti, 2024; Budiman & Sari, 2023).

4. Narrative Representations and Hidden Implications

Analysis of the narratives and illustrations in the textbook reveals the existence of biases and hidden implications in the representation of religious moderation in both countries. These biases are often unaware of by policymakers but have a significant impact on the formation of student perceptions and stereotypes.

One of the biases identified is the anthropomorphic bias of gender in role representation. Illustrations in PAI Indonesia textbooks often feature male figures as "leaders of tolerance discussions", "figures who provide religious advice", or central to activities that promote moderation (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022a, PAI Class X Student Book). Despite efforts to portray women's roles, these representations are still dominated by traditional roles (e.g., as mothers, home teachers) or as passive participants in public discussions. In Malaysia, gender bias is also similar, where illustrations depict women in the role of "guardians of social manners" or in the context of an idealized household, while leadership, intellectual, or advocacy roles in the context of moderation are more played by male figures or scholars (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2021, Islamic Education Book Form 4; Zahid & Hassan, 2023). This reflects an imbalance in gender representation that indirectly reinforces social stereotypes and limited gender roles in the religious and public spheres.

The representation of religious minorities also shows a problematic pattern in both countries. Malaysian curriculum documents tend to avoid explicit discussion of the Shia community or other Muslim minority groups, even when history and demographics indicate their existence (Hassan, 2024; Fauzi & Karim, 2023). The absence of this discussion can be interpreted as an attempt to maintain the homogeneity of the dominant interpretation of Sunni Islam and avoid controversy. In Indonesia, discussions about Muslim minority groups such as Ahmadiyya, despite being mentioned, tend to be limited to the context of "conflict resolution" or "potential division", rather than as part of a diversity that needs to be recognized and respected in the spirit of pluralism and human rights (Fata et al., 2024; Rahman & Anwar, 2023). This approach suggests that religious moderation may be understood more as a tool for conflict management or maintaining stability than as a full acceptance of deep theological differences.

Furthermore, the hidden narrative identified in the documents of the two countries is the instrumentalization of moderation in the interest of political stability. The material on "obedience to the legitimate government" (Ulil Amri) is often explicitly inserted in the context of religious moderation, especially in Malaysia, which can be interpreted as an effort to stem potential political disruption, protests, or social dissociation that are considered to threaten the stability of the country

(Asyari, 2024; Ali & Abdullah, 2023). Although adherence to a just leader is an Islamic teaching, its emphasis in the context of excessive religious moderation can limit the space for constructive criticism, the active participation of civil society in religious and social issues, or even the courage to speak out against injustice. This raises questions about the boundary between true moderation and ideological co-optation for political purposes.

Discussion

The findings of this comparative analysis strongly confirm the thesis of Asyari (2024) that socio-political and historical contexts play a fundamental role in shaping the construction and representation of religious moderation in the curriculum. The fundamental differences in definition, core values, and integration strategies between Indonesia and Malaysia are not accidental, but rather a reflection of the development paths of different countries and societies.

In Indonesia, the pressure of educational decentralization and extreme ethno-religious diversity has prompted the adoption of a "common platform" approach or a common forum, namely Pancasila. Pancasila as an inclusive state ideology functions as a large umbrella that accommodates various religious beliefs while demanding national commitment. Therefore, religious moderation in Indonesia is conceptualized as an effort to strengthen national unity through religious interpretations that are in harmony with Pancasila values, such as tolerance, social justice, and humanity (Suryana & Abdullah, 2020; Harun & Syarifuddin, 2023). This approach implicitly challenges groups that try to separate religion from the state or that want to apply religious teachings exclusively without considering pluralistic contexts. This model reflects the aspiration to manage diversity as a force, not as a potential divide, and to place national identity above primordial identity alone.

In contrast, the Islamic-Malay political hegemony and centralization of religious authority in Malaysia have maintained a religious-centric model in defining Wasatiyyah. Sunni Islam, as interpreted by JAKIM and the country's religious authorities, is the main reference in formulating the concept of moderation. This explains why Malaysia tends to emphasize adherence to Ulil Amri and the boundaries of interaction with non-Muslims, as part of efforts to maintain a strong Islamic identity within the framework of an Islamic-Malay state (Osman & Ali, 2023; Jamil & Hashim, 2022). This distinction clearly explains why Indonesia is more daring to integrate issues of substantive pluralism—for example, through a critical analysis of the history of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms or the exploration of other local religious traditions—that encourage deeper interfaith dialogue. Meanwhile, Malaysia emphasizes procedural coexistence, where mutual respect is key, but without too much theological dialogue that has the potential to challenge the dominant orthodoxy (Mohd & Omar, 2021; Rahman & Hassan, 2023). This is also consistent with JAKIM's focus on ensuring the harmony of faith among Malaysian Muslims, in order to avoid internal divisions that can threaten stability.

Theoretically, these findings strongly challenge the universalism assumption of the value of moderation carried by some scholars (e.g. Anwar, 2020), who tend to consider moderation as a single concept that can be applied uniformly in various contexts. In fact, this study shows that the operational definition of moderation is largely determined by the constellation of power, history, and local socio-political dynamics. In Indonesia, there is a competition for influence between the more inclusive Ministry of Religion and the sometimes more orthodox Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), creating a tension between inclusivism and orthodoxy in the curriculum narrative. This tension is reflected in how some topics, such as religious minorities, are framed—often more as issues that need to be addressed or resolved than as celebrated diversity (Fata et al., 2024; Rahman & Anwar, 2023). In Malaysia, the centralization of JAKIM's authority creates a homogenization of the interpretation and implementation of Wasatiyyah, which, while providing uniformity of message, has the potential to limit the diversity of thought and interpretation among Muslims themselves, especially regarding contemporary issues or minority groups that are not in line with official views (Hassan, 2024; Fauzi & Karim, 2023).

The practical implications of these findings are very significant for the future development of the PAI curriculum. Indonesia needs to strengthen the capacity of teachers in teaching dialogue-based moderation, critical reasoning, and problem-solving, not just memorizing definitions. Training that emphasizes reflective methodologies and participatory pedagogy will be crucial to ensure that students not only know about moderation but also be able to apply it in real life, facing social complexities with a moderate attitude (Wulandari & Setiawan, 2024; Budiman & Sari, 2023). Meanwhile, Malaysia can learn from Indonesia's collaborative project model to improve students' social skills and encourage more substantive interactions between ethnic and religious groups, beyond procedural coexistence that may be just a formality. The two countries also have similar homework in revising gender bias in illustrations and case examples in their textbooks, ensuring more balanced and inclusive representation for women in various roles, both in the domestic and public spheres, in accordance with Islamic justice values (Utami & Lestari, 2023; Zahid & Hassan, 2023).

The contribution of this research lies in the first discursive mapping that comparatively analyzes the artifacts of the post-2020 Indonesian and Malaysian PAI curriculum. This study provides new insights into how the narrative of moderation is shaped by national interests and how the concept of religion translates into education policy. This understanding is crucial to designing more effective and contextual educational interventions. However, it is important to recognize that this research is limited to document analysis. Therefore, further research is needed to explore implementation in the classroom (how teachers actually teach moderation and how the material is interpreted) and students' perceptions of moderation materials (how they accept and internalize those values, as well as their impact on their attitudes and behaviors). This empirical study will provide a more complete picture of the effectiveness of religious moderation policies in both countries, beyond mere policy rhetoric.

CONCLUSIONS

This comparative study conclusively proves that although Indonesia and Malaysia both demonstrate a strong commitment to instilling the value of religious moderation in their Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum, their conceptual approach and implementation strategies reflect the unique socio-political and historical configuration of each country. Indonesia interprets moderation as a tool to unite the nation that is closely integrated with the ideology of Pancasila and the spirit of diversity, encouraging social inclusivity and substantive tolerance within the framework of pluralism. In contrast, Malaysia emphasizes moderation as an expression of Wasatiyyah that is deeply rooted in the institutionalized Sunni Islamic tradition, with an emphasis on religious authority and procedural coexistence in its multiethnic society. The differences in the basis of legitimacy Pancasila as a state ideology versus institutionalized religious orthodoxy as well as pedagogical strategies transversal integration versus compartmentalization—are fundamental markers that distinguish these two models.

These findings highlight that the concept of religious moderation, while universal in spirit, is operationally constructed locally, influenced by power dynamics, national priorities, and dominant religious interpretations. The problematic gender bias and representation of minorities in curriculum documents in both countries also underscore the need for continuous monitoring and revision so that the message of moderation does not inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or discrimination, but rather genuinely promotes justice and equality.

Based on these findings, several strategic steps are recommended that can strengthen religious moderation initiatives in both countries and in the region more broadly:

- Establishment of the Indonesia-Malaysia Curriculum Exchange Forum: To establish an official platform for dialogue and sharing of best practices in the development and implementation of the moderation-oriented PAI curriculum. These forums can facilitate the exchange of materials, teacher training modules, and the experience of integrating sensitive issues effectively.
- Comprehensive Textbook Revision: Encourage regular and critical revision of PAI textbooks to eliminate identified gender biases, ensure more inclusive and empowering representation for women in various roles, and reconstruct narratives about minority groups to better value diversity rather than focusing solely on conflict management.

- Development of Cross-Country Teacher Training Modules: Provides comprehensive and ongoing teacher training modules, which focus not only on the cognitive aspects of moderation, but also on critical pedagogy, interfaith dialogue, and the skills of facilitating discussions on sensitive issues in the classroom. This kind of training can be organized collaboratively between teacher education institutions in both countries, promoting cross-cultural understanding.

The limitations of this study include the depth of analysis that is limited to official documents without direct observation in the classroom, as well as the scope of samples that have not reached the curriculum documents of madrassas in Indonesia that may have different nuances from public schools. Therefore, follow-up research with mixed-methods, which combines document analysis with empirical studies in the field (classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, perception surveys), is indispensable to validate and develop the insights presented here in a more holistic and applicable manner.

Going forward, the urgency of religious moderation in education demands more systemic and sustainable regional collaboration across Southeast Asia, given the challenges of radicalism and polarization that are transnational and know no national borders. As emphasized by Nurdin (2025), the PAI curriculum is not only a transmitter of knowledge and doctrine, but also a bastion of civilization that is crucial in shaping a peaceful, tolerant, and harmonious future society in the midst of the complexities of the modern world.

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