

## **Negotiating Religious Moderation in Pontianak City: Formal Constraints and Everyday Coexistence**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines how religious moderation is implemented and experienced in Pontianak City, with particular attention to the tension between formal institutional arrangements and everyday social interaction. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 24 informants from religious-bureaucratic, educational-academic, and civil society backgrounds, complemented by non-participant observation in informal public spaces. The findings show three recurring patterns. First, formal regulatory mechanisms, particularly in the establishment of houses of worship, may impose uneven procedural burdens on minority groups. Second, inclusive educational initiatives may encounter social suspicion and limited institutional support, making moderation difficult to sustain in practice. Third, informal public spaces such as *warung kopi* provide more ordinary and flexible opportunities for interaction across religious and social boundaries, thereby supporting practical coexistence in everyday life. These findings suggest that religious moderation should not be understood only through policy discourse and formal programs, but also through the uneven ways it is negotiated and practiced in daily social settings. The study argues that strengthening religious moderation requires not only institutional design, but also wider community engagement and greater attention to informal spaces of coexistence in plural urban contexts.

**Keywords:** *Religious Moderation; Formal Constraints; Inclusive Education; Informal Public Space; Pontianak*

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### **A. Introduction**

Religious moderation has increasingly become a strategic policy agenda in Indonesia, particularly in response to concerns over rising conservatism, radicalism, and social fragmentation (Musyahid and Kolis 2023; Zaluchu, Widodo, and Kriswanto 2025). At the policy level, this agenda is often linked to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions (Zahri, Puspitasari, and Lubis 2021;

Zurayah and Lubis 2026). Existing studies generally emphasize that religious moderation is not limited to doctrinal balance, but also involves cultural accommodation, social interaction, and the capacity to sustain harmony in plural settings (Setinawati et al. 2025). In practice, however, the implementation of religious moderation at the local level often encounters complex sociological tensions. Pontianak, as a city marked by ethnic and religious diversity, provides an important context for examining these tensions. In such a plural urban setting, the discourse of moderation does not always translate smoothly into everyday institutional practice. Instead, it may intersect with exclusionary narratives, local contestation, and unequal access to public recognition. Previous studies have shown that disputes over houses of worship, intergroup suspicion, and bureaucratic restrictions remain central challenges in many parts of Indonesia (Arifianto 2020; Al Qurtuby 2025; Tanasaldy 2012). In the Pontianak context, these issues become particularly relevant because relations among Malay, Dayak, and Chinese communities are shaped not only by coexistence, but also by historical and social sensitivities. Similar patterns of accommodative interaction and negotiated coexistence have also been observed in other plural urban settings in Indonesia, where everyday interethnic and interreligious contact plays an important role in sustaining social harmony (Niswah et al. 2025).

One important issue concerns the implementation of the Joint Ministerial Decree (PBM) No. 9 and 8 of 2006 on the establishment of houses of worship. Although the regulation is formally intended to maintain harmony, in practice the administrative requirement for local community support may create procedural obstacles for minority groups. Several studies indicate that such requirements can be used by dominant groups to delay, contest, or block the establishment of minority worship spaces (Arifinsyah and Sofian 2021; Zurayah and Lubis 2026). In this sense, bureaucracy may function not only as an administrative mechanism, but also as a site where power relations are negotiated and minority rights become vulnerable (Arifinsyah and Sofian 2021; Crouch 2010) This condition is important for understanding how a policy designed in the language of harmony may produce exclusionary effects at the grassroots level.

Tensions related to moderation are also visible in the educational sphere. Schools that attempt to promote inclusivity and cross-cultural interaction may face resistance from segments of society that view such efforts with suspicion. In some cases, inclusive educational practices are associated with fears of theological deviation or hidden religious agendas, including accusations of “Christianization” (Walad, Hidayat, and Fatimah 2024). This indicates that moderation education is not simply a matter of curriculum design, but also of social reception and community trust. Recent studies suggest that religious moderation programs in educational settings often remain stronger at the

cognitive level than at the level of deeper social and attitudinal transformation (Chotimah, Qudsy, and Yusuf 2025; Mulyana 2023). As a result, the effort to institutionalize moderation in schools may become fragile when not supported by the wider social environment.

At the same time, social resilience does not develop only through formal institutions. Informal public spaces may also play an important role in shaping everyday forms of coexistence. In Pontianak, the culture of warung kopi can be seen as one such space, where cross-identity encounters take place in a relatively fluid and non-bureaucratic setting (Jati and Bachtiar 2024; Noaime et al. 2025). These spaces allow ordinary interactions across religious and ethnic boundaries and may contribute to what this study refers to as lived moderation. Informal communal practices also indicate that everyday interaction can function as a practical resource for sustaining social relations in diverse communities (Prasojo, Elmansyah, and Haji Masri 2019). These informal dimensions are significant because they highlight forms of coexistence that are not fully captured by policy-centered approaches to moderation.

Despite the growing literature on religious moderation in Indonesia, two issues remain insufficiently connected. First, many studies discuss moderation primarily as a normative or educational agenda, while fewer examine how administrative instruments may generate exclusion in practice. Second, studies on coexistence and local resilience have not been sufficiently linked to analysis of how formal regulation and informal social interaction operate side by side in shaping religious relations in urban settings. This study addresses that gap by examining the tension between policy regulation and everyday practice in Pontianak City. It analyzes how the implementation of religious moderation may produce exclusionary effects in formal settings, while also exploring how informal public spheres contribute to everyday social resilience. By doing so, this article seeks to offer a more grounded sociological reading of religious moderation, one that places institutional regulation and everyday interaction within the same analytical frame.

## **B. Methods**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine how religious moderation is implemented and experienced in the multicultural setting of Pontianak City. The primary research locus was Pontianak. The case of the rejection of a minority church in Desa Kapur, an area bordering the city, was included as a supporting case because it reflects broader religious and spatial tensions connected to the Pontianak context. Fieldwork was conducted from January to November 2025.

Informants were selected purposively based on their relevance to the research focus, particularly those involved in interfaith relations, policy

implementation, educational initiatives related to religious moderation, or experiences of administrative and social exclusion within the last two years. In total, this study involved 24 key informants drawn from three broad groups: religious and bureaucratic actors, educational and academic actors, and civil society actors. They represented major ethnic backgrounds in the area, including Malay, Dayak, and Chinese/Tionghoa communities, as well as several officially recognized religious groups. The first group included the Head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Pontianak and representatives of the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) from Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The second group included moderation instructors, academics, and principals of inclusive schools. The third group consisted of civil society actors, including minority youth and community members whose experiences were relevant to the study. This composition was intended to capture perspectives from policy actors, institutional practitioners, and community members directly connected to the implementation and reception of religious moderation in everyday life.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and non-participant observation. Interviews were used to explore how religious moderation was understood, practiced, and contested by different actors. Observation in informal public spaces, especially warung kopi, was used to complement interview data by examining patterns of everyday interaction across social and religious boundaries. These observations did not function as a standalone basis for generalization, but as contextual evidence to help interpret how coexistence was practiced in routine urban settings.

All interviews were conducted with participants' consent. Institutional actors were identified based on their public roles when relevant to the analysis, while civil society members and participants from potentially vulnerable groups were anonymized through pseudonyms. The data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2023). Interview transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to identify recurring issues, followed by the generation of initial codes from both interview and observational data. Codes referring to similar patterns were then grouped and refined into broader interpretive themes. Three themes were found to recur most consistently across the material and therefore structure the discussion in this article: administrative constraints in formal regulation, tensions surrounding inclusive educational practice, and the role of informal public spaces in everyday coexistence. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, interview data were compared with field observations, and selected informants were re-contacted during the interpretation process to clarify key points and maintain consistency with the context of the data.

### **C. Results and Discussion**

This section presents and discusses the findings on the implementation of religious moderation in Pontianak City. The analysis focuses on how moderation is negotiated in different social arenas, particularly in formal institutional settings and informal public spaces. Based on interview data and field observations, three recurring patterns emerged from the analysis. First, formal regulatory mechanisms may create uneven procedural burdens for minority groups. Second, inclusive educational initiatives may encounter social suspicion and limited support from the wider community. Third, informal public spaces such as warung kopi may provide more ordinary and flexible opportunities for interaction across religious and social boundaries. Table 1 summarizes these patterns, which are then discussed in the following sections.

Table 1.

Thematic Patterns in Formal Constraints and Everyday Coexistence

Dimension of Analysis	Formal Constraints	Everyday Coexistence
Sphere of Interaction	Formal institutions, schools, and state licensing procedures	Informal public spaces such as warung kopi and communal activities
Key Actors	Bureaucratic actors, dominant majority groups, and conservative parent groups	Youth, interfaith actors, and grassroots communities
Instruments / Medium	Administrative requirements under PBM 2006, public objection, and social stigma	Communal seating, everyday interaction, and fluid dialogue
Characteristics	Procedural rigidity, contestation, and unequal access	Informal, egalitarian, and relational engagement
Social Impact	Delay, exclusion, and minority vulnerability	Familiarity, trust, and practical coexistence

*Source: Processed by the authors from field data, 2025.*

### 1. Inclusive Education and the Persistence of Social Suspicion

Findings from the educational sector show a tension between the normative discourse of religious moderation and its reception in everyday social life. While policy narratives position inclusive education as an important instrument for fostering tolerance and supporting peaceful and inclusive institutions (Zahri et al. 2021; Zaluchu et al. 2025), field data indicate that such initiatives may still encounter suspicion and resistance at the community level. In this context, inclusive schools in Pontianak become important sites for observing how moderation is institutionally promoted while remaining socially vulnerable when broader public trust is weak.

The narrative of “Christianization” or liberalization is not merely a localized rumor but a persistent social pressure. At an inclusive school in Pontianak, the student body encompasses five different religious backgrounds.

To foster genuine inclusivity, the school actively accommodates and celebrates the religious festivals of all these faiths. However, this very multicultural practice is frequently misconstrued by conservative factions as a hidden agenda. This tension is vividly articulated by the school's Principal:

“We are often slandered... accused of Christianization simply because [of our inclusive practices and because] I do not wear a hijab... I am perceived as either a Muslim, a non-Muslim, or something in between. But I feel no need to explain myself to them, because even if I showed them an authentic certificate from the President, they still wouldn't believe it.”

This statement suggests that inclusive educational practices may be received not simply as pedagogical efforts, but as socially charged symbols that are vulnerable to suspicion and misinterpretation. In this case, the accusation of “Christianization” shows how pluralist initiatives may be read through defensive understandings of religious identity. The concept of collective narcissism is useful here as a limited analytical lens for understanding why difference may be perceived as a threat rather than as a basis for coexistence (Mazya, Ridho, and Irfani 2024; Zurayah and Lubis 2026).

The interview data also show that tensions around inclusivity are not limited to external community responses, but may extend into the internal environment of the school itself. As the Principal explained, there was concern that exclusive religious orientations among teachers or student teachers could affect how professional responsibilities were understood in everyday practice:

“There are university students and teachers who have been exposed to certain exclusive ideologies... I worry that if a teacher is exposed to that mindset, they might abruptly abandon the classroom when the call to prayer (adzan) sounds.”

In this context, the issue is not the religious obligation itself, but the possibility that rigid interpretations may create tension with pedagogical responsibilities in a diverse school setting. This finding is in line with broader discussions on teacher preparedness and the challenges of translating moderation discourse into inclusive educational practice, especially when institutional norms intersect with stronger currents of religious conservatism (Walad, Hidayat, and Fatimah 2024).

The findings further suggest that institutional support for inclusive educational practice remains limited. This is reflected in the statement of the Coordinator of the Center for Religious Moderation at IAIN Pontianak, who noted the top-down character of many moderation programs:

“Most socialization only reaches the upper echelons or officials... it does not take root in the grassroots community. At the structural level of the local government, specific training for teachers on interfaith harmony is virtually non-existent.”

Similar concerns have also been noted in urban educational settings where tolerance is shaped not only by formal curriculum, but also by the wider social environment in which students and schools operate (Kartono et al. 2025). In this respect, the study supports earlier arguments that moderation programs often remain stronger at the formal and cognitive level than at the affective and relational level of social practice (Imamah and Lee 2024). Read in this way, the problem is not that moderation initiatives are absent, but that their institutional reach is still limited when schools are not supported by continuous facilitation and wider community trust.

## **2. Administrative Constraints and Minority Vulnerability in Bureaucratic Practice**

Findings related to the establishment of houses of worship show that bureaucratic procedure is not experienced equally by all religious groups. In the Pontianak context, the implementation of the Joint Ministerial Decree (PBM) No. 9 and 8 of 2006 may impose heavier procedural burdens on minority communities, particularly because the process depends on local approval in addition to formal administrative compliance. This reading is consistent with previous studies showing that regulations on houses of worship can become arenas of contestation rather than neutral procedural mechanisms (Arifinsyah and Sofian 2021; Zurayah and Lubis 2026). Interview data in this study further indicate that some actors involved in the field also recognize the limitations of this regulatory framework. As one senior FKUB official, speaking anonymously, stated:

“The problem lies precisely with those who created these regulations... It is no longer suited to the times, it does not fit the conditions of society, and there is discrimination.”

This statement points to an important limitation of the policy. The requirement to obtain support from local residents may place minority groups in a more vulnerable position because access to administrative approval depends not only on formal procedure, but also on local power relations and social acceptance. In a plural urban setting, such territorial requirements may open space for contestation, delay, or rejection before the process can even be completed. In this respect, the findings in Pontianak reinforce earlier arguments that permit procedures for houses of worship can function as socially negotiated barriers, especially when majority approval becomes decisive in practice. Rather than operating as a purely administrative instrument, the procedure may therefore work as a gatekeeping mechanism whose outcomes are shaped by unequal social relations and by broader contestations over religious recognition and minority rights (Crouch 2007; Wahab et al. 2024)

At the community level, these procedural requirements may become highly vulnerable to contestation. The case of the Catholic church construction in

Desa Kapur illustrates how objections can emerge even before the administrative process is completed. A senior leader of the provincial Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB Kalbar) recounted the phenomenon:

“They were just starting to process the requirements... immediately a forum was created by the locals, and it was outright rejected before anything was even built. It almost caused a riot.”

The vulnerability of the process becomes more visible when formal compliance does not automatically secure recognition. This was also emphasized by the Chairman of the provincial Buddhist council:

“Even if 60 approving signatures are collected, if one or two people object, it becomes a legal case. Law enforcement by authorities is not firm... so the regulation can easily be played and manipulated.”

Read together, these testimonies indicate that administrative procedure alone is insufficient to guarantee fair access when implementation remains dependent on shifting local acceptance and weak enforcement. This supports wider scholarship showing that the governance of religious harmony may be constrained not only by legal design, but also by uneven institutional capacity in practice (Crouch 2010; Hidayanti and Ali 2023).

These testimonies suggest that administrative obstruction is not merely a technical matter, but is closely connected to local power relations and unequal access to recognition. From this perspective, bureaucracy cannot be treated as entirely neutral, because its implementation may reproduce exclusion even when it is formally framed as a mechanism for maintaining harmony. The concept of collective narcissism helps illuminate how majority sentiment can shape territorial claims over public religious presence (Mazya et al. 2024), while discussions on state power and institutional governance are useful for reading how legal procedure may stabilize inequality rather than resolve it. In that sense, the findings in Pontianak indicate a serious tension between the formal promise of religious moderation and the practical vulnerability faced by minority groups in accessing equal religious recognition.

### **3. *Warung Kopi* as an Informal Space of Everyday Coexistence**

In contrast to the formal settings discussed above, the findings also show the importance of informal public spaces in everyday interreligious interaction. In Pontianak, *warung kopi* (coffee shop) appears not merely as a commercial venue, but as a social space in which people from different backgrounds can encounter one another in relatively fluid and ordinary ways. This reading is consistent with studies that view informal spaces as important arenas of negotiation, urban sociality, and everyday coexistence (Jati and Bachtar 2024; Noaime et al. 2025). In the context of this study, the significance of *warung kopi* lies not in claiming that it resolves social tension altogether, but in showing how routine interaction

may create opportunities for familiarity, conversation, and coexistence outside formal institutional frameworks.

Non-participant observations in several traditional coffee shops along Jalan Gajah Mada, Pontianak, support this pattern. In these spaces, visible markers of religious and cultural identity appeared in close proximity within ordinary social interaction. People from different social and religious backgrounds shared tables, occupied the same physical setting, and engaged in routine conversation without strong signs of segregation. This observation is consistent with the statement of the Coordinator of the Center for Religious Moderation at IAIN Pontianak:

“In Pontianak's coffee shops, people intermingle completely. Whether you are a Christian or a Muslim, everyone gathers there. No one ever says, “Sorry, you are not a Muslim.” There is no compartmentalization. They literally melt and become one there.”

In the context of this study, *warung kopi* can therefore be read as an informal social sphere in which everyday proximity and repeated interaction may help sustain practical coexistence. This interpretation is in line with studies that emphasize the social significance of informal spaces and dialogical encounters in shaping more open forms of social relation (Jati and Bachtiar 2024).

The significance of these spaces is also related to their unscripted character and everyday spatial arrangements. Unlike formal forums, interaction in *warung kopi* tends to occur through ordinary conversation rather than through explicitly programmed dialogue. One example observed in the field was the practice of communal seating at long wooden tables. When the venues were crowded, individuals from different ethnic and religious backgrounds shared physical space and sat face-to-face with people they did not necessarily know. In sociological terms, such repeated proximity may reduce social distance and open possibilities for informal recognition, even if it does not automatically eliminate prejudice. This reading resonates with studies that place everyday encounter and spatial interaction at the center of social resilience in plural settings (Hanafiah et al. 2025; Noaime et al. 2025).

The findings also indicate a generational dimension in the use of public space. Younger participants were described as more comfortable with informal and flexible settings than with formal interfaith forums organized through official channels. In this context, *warung kopi* becomes relevant not only as a place of gathering, but also as a space in which everyday conversation, peer interaction, and digital references shape how religious difference is discussed and negotiated. Rather than suggesting a complete shift away from formal institutions, this finding indicates that younger actors may prefer less formal arenas for engaging diversity, a tendency that is also noted in studies on youth identity and informal dialogue in urban Indonesia (Jati and Bachtiar 2024).

These findings suggest that informal public spaces deserve greater attention in discussions of religious moderation. Without idealizing them as conflict-free arenas, *warung kopi* illustrates how everyday interaction may complement formal initiatives by providing a more ordinary and less scripted setting for coexistence, a pattern that resonates with broader discussions on authentic coexistence in urban Indonesia and on the role of cultural resources in sustaining social harmony (Nawir et al. 2025; Parihat 2024). For this reason, efforts to strengthen moderation should not focus only on regulation and formal programs, but also consider how community-based interaction can support trust and social communication in plural urban settings.

#### **D. Conclusion**

This study shows that the implementation of religious moderation in Pontianak City is shaped by tensions across different social arenas. In formal settings, particularly in the regulation of houses of worship and in inclusive educational initiatives, the discourse of moderation does not always operate in an inclusive way. Its implementation may instead be constrained by procedural requirements, unequal community acceptance, and limited institutional support. In this sense, religious moderation in practice may remain vulnerable to exclusionary dynamics even when it is formally framed as a policy of harmony. At the same time, the findings indicate that coexistence is also sustained through ordinary forms of interaction outside formal institutional settings. In the context of Pontianak, *warung kopi* functions as an informal public space in which repeated encounter, shared proximity, and unscripted conversation create opportunities for practical coexistence across religious and social boundaries. Although such spaces should not be idealized as free from tension, they show that everyday interaction may complement formal initiatives by supporting familiarity, communication, and social trust.

The findings suggest that a sociological reading of religious moderation needs to pay attention not only to policy discourse and formal institutional design, but also to the uneven ways in which moderation is received, negotiated, and practiced in everyday life. Strengthening religious moderation, therefore, requires not only formal programs and regulatory arrangements, but also sustained institutional facilitation, wider community engagement, and greater attention to informal social spaces that support coexistence in plural urban settings. Finally, this study is limited to the urban context of Pontianak and one supporting case from its surrounding area. Future research may develop a broader comparative perspective by examining how similar tensions between formal regulation and everyday coexistence unfold in other urban and non-urban settings.

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