

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN MUSLIM-MAJORITY COUNTRIES: Comparing Gorontalo, Indonesia and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

Momy Hunowu

IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo
Jl. Gelatik 1 Kota Gorontalo, Gorontalo, 96119, Indonesia
e-mail: momyhunowu@iaingorontalo.ac.id

Kartini Kamaruzzaman

Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia
Bandar Baru Nilai 71800, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia
e-mail: kartinikamaruzzaman@usim.edu.my

Hatim Badu Pakuna

IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo
Jl. Gelatik 1 Kota Gorontalo, Gorontalo, 96119, Indonesia
e-mail: hatimpakuna@iaingorontalo.ac.id

Ahmad Khoirul Fata

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel
Jl. A. Yani 117, Wonocolo, Surabaya, 60236, Indonesia
e-mail: cakfata@uinsa.ac.id

Abstract: Indonesia and Malaysia, as Muslim-majority nations, are recognized for their tolerance of other religious groups. However, this study highlights underlying challenges threatening social stability in both countries. Focusing on Gorontalo, Indonesia, and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, the research examines the dynamics of religious pluralism and its societal challenges. Using a qualitative approach, main data were gathered through interviews with interfaith leaders, teachers, activists, and officials. The findings reveal that, while harmony and interfaith dialogue exist, challenges persist. In Gorontalo, minority communities face difficulties in constructing places of worship and acquiring suitable religious teachers. In Negeri Sembilan tensions arise over proper use of “religious plurality” or “pluralism” and the use of the term “Allah” by the Christians. Apparently, on top of the existing efforts other creative ways need to be used to strengthen religious harmony catering for the ever evolving social complexities in both regions.

Keywords: Religious Pluralism, Interfaith Challenges, Social Harmony, Gorontalo, Negeri Sembilan

Corresponding Author	Ahmad Khoirul Fata			
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Introduction

Amidst their rich cultural and religious diversity, Indonesia and Malaysia are often viewed as examples of religious pluralism. However, underlying this harmonious image are serious challenges that threaten societal integrity. In Indonesia, despite being a pioneer of tolerance with over 17,000 islands, religious-based conflicts frequently occur,¹ revealing hypocrisy in pluralism where tolerance is discussed but not genuinely implemented. This suggests that while the concept of tolerance is acknowledged, its practical application is often superficial.² In practice, despite the principles of tolerance, tensions between religious believers persist due to inconsistent application of these principles, which are often undermined by existing laws and social that do not fully support genuine coexistence.³ Studies indicate that interreligious tensions persist despite efforts to promote tolerance.⁴ Similarly, Malaysia faces challenges with religious pluralism; while policies promote interreligious harmony, political interference and NGO agendas create tensions that may lead to conflict.⁵ Thus, both countries exhibit religious harmony but remain vulnerable to interreligious divisions and conflicts.

Studies show varying trends in portraying religious pluralism. Some focus on the challenges countries face regarding religious teachings and the politicization of religion. Zainuddin emphasizes that Indonesia and Malaysia must address issues arising from the intersection of religious teachings and political interests.⁶ Çevik highlights Turkey's challenges in managing religious and ethnic diversity, which have led to the exclusion of minorities and a lack of tolerance for non-Muslims.⁷ The emphasis on Turkey is relevant as the challenges it faces can provide valuable insights for Indonesia and Malaysia in their efforts to achieve more inclusive and harmonious pluralism. Recent research suggests a comparative theology approach that fosters deeper dialogue and mutual respect.⁸ Other studies examine resistance to pluralism, particularly from dominant Muslim groups in both countries,⁹ with efforts to oppose pluralism through fatwa institutions.¹⁰ In addition, resistance to pluralism can also be seen in a global context, such as white supremacy in the US during the Trump era and far-right movements in Europe that are often intolerant of people of color.¹¹ Societal responses to religious diversity vary widely, indicating ongoing challenges in fostering substantive pluralism.¹² Additionally, research on historical trajectories and government policies reveals their impact on managing religious pluralism.¹³ Camilleri discusses how the experiences of three Malaysian prime ministers reflect the dynamics of addressing religious pluralism, influenced by colonial and pre-colonial contexts.¹⁴

Previous research has not specifically questioned whether Indonesia and Malaysia have actually succeeded in creating harmony or merely masked deep-seated injustices and dissatisfaction. However, any other studies that have questioned it. For example, Stijn C van Huis in his work "Religion, Law and Intolerance in Indonesia" examines how legal and social frameworks challenge the idea of religious harmony.¹⁵ In addition, Wong

Kee Sing who discusses The Influence of the Malay Religious Identity on Non-Muslim Public Roles, as well as criticizing the cohesive narrative of pluralism.¹⁶ Therefore, managing religious pluralism in these two countries requires more than just policy; it requires a real commitment to respect and celebrate diversity.

This paper aims to fill the gaps in previous studies by emphasizing the dynamics and challenges of religious pluralism faced by the communities of Gorontalo, Indonesia, and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Although both countries have attempted to design programs to foster peace among religious communities, this harmony is often “deliberately polished” to conceal the underlying tensions. In this context, this paper formulates three main questions that will guide the discussion: 1) How does the image of religious pluralism and harmony differ from the challenges of social tensions in Indonesia and Malaysia? 2) How do governments and religious institutions influence people’s perceptions of religious pluralism in these two countries? 3) What are concrete examples from Indonesia and Malaysia that demonstrate the success or failure of religious pluralism in social practice?

This paper is based on the argument that both countries attempt to design programs to create peace between religions; however, the harmony displayed is often superficial, concealing underlying tensions. Despite efforts to foster harmony, an element of hypocrisy must be considered in realizing true pluralism in Indonesia and Malaysia. This aligns with the questions posed in this paper, which address the differing images of harmony in religious pluralism, the influence of government and religious institutions, and the concrete examples of success and failure of religious pluralism. To answer the questions regarding whether Indonesia and Malaysia have genuinely achieved true religious pluralism or merely present a polished facade of harmony, a review of the existing literature is necessary. The following section will outline previous research on the challenges of pluralism in both countries, focusing on social, political, and governmental policies.

Conceptual Framework

Religious Pluralism: An Explanation of the Term

The first step in studying religious pluralism is to clarify its meaning to avoid confusion. “Religious pluralism” can be examined from two perspectives: sociological and theological. Sociologically, it refers to a society composed of diverse beliefs, religions, races, ethnicities, and traditions, where individuals hold firm convictions about their own beliefs. Theologically, it pertains to the Catholic Church’s stance toward non-Christian religions, encompassing exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism asserts that salvation is only attainable through Christian doctrine, encapsulated in the phrase “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” (outside the Church there is no salvation). Over time, this evolved into inclusivism, where the Church acknowledges truths in other religions while maintaining that Christian truth is more complete. The culmination of this evolution is pluralism, which posits that all religions possess the same truth and can guide their

adherents toward salvation.¹⁷ In understanding religious pluralism, it is essential to consider the Islamic perspective. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of diversity, as seen in Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13), which states that Allah created humans from various tribes and nations so that they may know one another. Islamic thinkers such as Al-Ghazali also stress the importance of tolerance and understanding among religions in their works.¹⁸ Thus, religious pluralism in the Islamic context is not merely a concept but also a call to respect and understand differences. However, it is important to note that religious pluralism can also be analyzed from other perspectives, such as politics, culture, and psychology, all of which provide additional insights into how pluralism functions in a broader context.

In this research, religious pluralism is understood within a sociological context, rather than through the lens of Church tradition. The researcher perceives religious pluralism as a reflection of the diversity present in Indonesian and Malaysian societies, rather than as an acknowledgment of the truth inherent in each religion. In Malaysia, sociological religious pluralism is commonly referred to as "religious plurality." In Indonesia, some individuals prefer the term "religious plurality" over "religious pluralism," as the suffix "ism" in "pluralism" tends to imply an ideological interpretation or belief in the commonality of religious truths.¹⁹

Thus, this study interprets religious pluralism not as an attempt to equate all religions, as such an approach would imply a rejection of God's existing laws. Instead, it is viewed as an attitude that respects differences and fosters cooperation to achieve common goals within the framework of diversity. Indeed, each religion possesses its uniqueness, and these differences should be regarded as something special.²⁰

The practice of religious pluralism in Indonesia differs significantly from religious plurality in Malaysia. Studies on Malaysia have examined the roles of prime ministers and Islamic scholars, noting that leaders like Mahathir, Abdullah, and Najib faced challenges in managing religious diversity amid the rising assertiveness of Muslim discourse.²¹ In Malaysia, religious pluralism is often viewed as a potential threat to the Islamic faith, raising concerns about its impact on Muslim beliefs.²² Islamic scholars hold varying opinions on this concept; some embrace religious diversity and promote interfaith dialogue, while others accept it only under certain conditions or outright reject the idea of equating the truths of all religions. This diversity of views reflects an ongoing debate within the Islamic community regarding the implications and acceptability of religious pluralism.²³

Under Najib's leadership, official Islamic institutions gained prominence in defining Islam in Malaysia, resulting in a trend toward Islamic uniformity rather than Muslim plurality. This shift complicated Malaysia's pluralist politics and hindered the accommodation of inclusive Islamic ideas. The increased influence of these institutions reflects a broader movement toward a centralized interpretation of Islam, posing

challenges for the country's diverse religious landscape. Mahathir Mohamad, who served two terms as Prime Minister, often emphasized Malay and Islamic identity but showed greater openness to interfaith dialogue during his second term. Abdullah Badawi, the fifth Prime Minister, was known for his moderate approach, promoting tolerance and interfaith dialogue through the concept of "Islam Hadhari." Najib Razak, in office from 2009 to 2018, faced challenges regarding religious pluralism, with policies often perceived as favoring Malay and Islamic groups, despite his attempts to promote the 1Malaysia concept. Anwar Ibrahim, as the tenth Prime Minister, has committed to building a more inclusive and just society through the Malaysia MADANI initiative, encouraging interfaith dialogue to foster harmony amid Malaysia's religious diversity.²⁴

In Indonesia, religious pluralism is vital for maintaining social harmony, with religious leaders and organizations leading efforts to foster tolerance. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim organization in the country, advocates for religious pluralism by denouncing violence and promoting a moderate interpretation of Islam.²⁵ However, conflicts and intolerant attitudes toward religious minorities persist. To combat these issues, religious leaders have organized seminars on pluralism, Pancasila, and interfaith dialogue, while also enhancing religious education to improve understanding of Indonesia's diverse society.²⁶

Despite these challenges, Indonesia's approach to pluralism differs from Western models, as religion plays a positive role in politics and public life. Consequently, the responsibility for creating a democratic and pluralistic society lies not only with state leaders but also with religious leaders and institutions.²⁷ Moreover, it is important to look at the conceptual framework from the perspective of Islam, which has a rich tradition of tolerance and pluralism in its history. Since the beginning of Islamic history, there have been practices of tolerance towards different faiths and communities, as seen in the Medina charter that regulates relations between Muslims and non-Muslims.²⁸

Challenges in Creating Religious Harmony

Achieving religious harmony in Indonesia is challenging due to its diverse society, which encompasses various religions, ethnicities, and cultures.²⁹ Although the constitution guarantees religious freedom, its implementation faces obstacles stemming from misunderstandings about individual and communal religious rights. This misunderstanding can lead to conflicts framed as a defense of religious sanctity.³⁰ To address these challenges, scholars propose several approaches, including interreligious dialogue and multicultural da'wah models.³¹ These initiatives aim to foster pluralism, protect equality, and develop brotherhood among diverse groups. Such efforts are essential for creating peace and harmony within Indonesia's multicultural society.³²

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Malaysia faces challenges in achieving religious harmony. While Islam is the official religion, the constitution guarantees freedom of worship for all.³⁴ Despite its reputation for inter-religious harmony, Malaysia's ethnic and religious diversity can create tensions, necessitating mechanisms for inter-religious dialogue.³⁵ A dynamic concept of harmony based on maqasid principles of sharia has been proposed to protect both Muslim and non-Muslim communities and prevent conflicts.³⁶ Interfaith dialogue has proven effective in fostering togetherness and minimizing conflict, despite initial skepticism.³⁷ The challenge remains in implementing interfaith dialogue while addressing theological differences and maintaining national cohesion.³⁸ Moreover, political, economic, social, and educational issues can unite or divide communities, complicating the pursuit of harmony in Malaysia's multicultural society.³⁹

Interfaith Harmony and Hypocrisy

In a social context, harmony encompasses positive and mutually supportive interactions between individuals or groups, allowing them to coexist peacefully despite their differences.⁴⁰ Harmonious relations between religious communities can be fostered through mutual assistance, empathy, and respect for religious freedom.⁴¹ The Qur'an emphasizes tolerance and universal values such as justice, equality, and dialogue in interfaith relations, as well as the importance of overcoming injustice.⁴² Effective communication among religious leaders and communities is crucial for creating a peaceful and conducive environment for interfaith harmony.⁴³ Recognizing and respecting diversity is essential to maintaining unity in a pluralistic society, thus encouraging harmonious coexistence among different religious communities.⁴⁴

A harmonious life can be disrupted by hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is a state in which a person confidently claims to have a certain attitude or behaviour, but acts differently from what they say.⁴⁵ In many cases, this involves presenting information that has been fabricated or made up to hide the truth to reverse the facts. While such information can seem convincing, it is often difficult to determine its veracity.⁴⁶ Thus, hypocrisy creates an illusion that can mislead others about the integrity and consistency of one's actions and beliefs.

In interfaith life, there is often dishonesty that can trigger conflict.⁴⁷ When individuals or groups are dishonest in expressing their beliefs or views, it can create misunderstandings and tensions. This dishonesty, whether in the form of spreading misleading information or disregarding the values of mutual respect, has the potential to disrupt harmony and

create greater conflict among religious communities.⁴⁸ By understanding the challenges of pluralism identified in the previous literature review, this research is designed to analyse more deeply the experiences of pluralism in Gorontalo and Negeri Sembilan. The following section will describe the research methods used to explore how these two communities respond to the dynamics of pluralism.

Method

This research was conducted in Negeri Sembilan and Gorontalo, two pluralistic regions in Malaysia and Indonesia. The selection of these regions is based on social characteristics that are interesting to compare, although it is important to note that the population proportions of Gorontalo and Negeri Sembilan differ significantly compared to the total population of each country. According to the latest data, Gorontalo's population is about 1.2 million, which represents only about 0.4% of Indonesia's total population of more than 270 million. Meanwhile, Negeri Sembilan's population is around 1.1 million, which represents around 3.4% of Malaysia's total population of around 32 million. While the populations of these regions are similar in absolute numbers, their proportions relative to their respective national contexts differ significantly. Specifically, Gorontalo constitutes a smaller fraction of Indonesia's population, making it less representative of the broader social dynamics of the country. Conversely, Negeri Sembilan's population is a more substantial representation of Malaysia's demographic makeup.

The selection of these regions allows for an accurate comparison of social dynamics and interfaith interactions. In addition, both regions have cultural similarities. The population of Negeri Sembilan consists of a majority of Muslims, followed by Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians, with a majority of Malays, followed by Chinese and Indians. The population in Negeri Sembilan also consists of 12 tribes, namely Tanah Datar, Batu Hampar, Seri Lemak, Anak Melaka, Mungkal, Payakumbuh, Seri Melenggeng, Tigo Batu, Tigo Nenek, Anak Aceh, Batu Belang, and Biduanda. The people of Negeri Sembilan, who are descendants of Minangkabau migrants, adhere to the philosophy of "*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah*" (Customs based on Sharia, Sharia based on the Quran), which emphasises the relationship between customs and religion.⁴⁹

The people of Gorontalo share a customary philosophy that emphasizes religious values, making both Gorontalo and Negeri Sembilan relevant for research on religious pluralism. Studying inter-religious relations and the challenges of creating harmony amidst diversity in these regions is compelling for three main reasons. First, the predominantly Muslim plural societies in Indonesia and Malaysia exhibit different dynamics and challenges. Second, this research focuses on a comparative analysis of religious pluralism in both regions, allowing for the exploration of the nuances and complexities of interfaith relations, as well as the factors that support or hinder harmony. While many studies on religious pluralism exist, comparative analyses are rare, providing

a fresh perspective. Third, the research aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of religious pluralism that highlights harmony despite existing tensions.

The phenomenon of religious pluralism was explored through qualitative research utilizing primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researcher to capture participants' perspectives on interreligious relations and challenges in achieving harmony. These interviews were designed to provide flexibility in exploring relevant topics while still maintaining focus on the research questions. In addition, participatory observation was also applied, allowing the researcher to engage in community activities and religious events to observe social interactions firsthand. Secondary data consisted of documents, previous research, and online news reports regarding interreligious activities and conflicts in the region under study. Documents include government reports, academic articles, and publications relevant to the context of religious pluralism in Negeri Sembilan and Gorontalo. This combination of data facilitated a comparative analysis of religious harmony and pluralism.

This research method aims to identify the dynamics and challenges of religious pluralism by involving semi-structured interviews with religious counselors, teachers, village government and activists as the main data sources. A total of 20 participants were selected based on their significant roles in socio-religious activities in plural societies, which enabled a deeper understanding of their experiences and views on the challenges of religious pluralism. The selection of participants was done through a purposive sampling approach, where the researcher chose individuals who have relevant knowledge and experience to provide rich insights into the issues faced in the context of pluralism. In this way, the research was able to uncover diverse and in-depth perspectives on the challenges faced in achieving interfaith harmony.

Data analysis followed a comparative method with three main stages: data reduction (grouping, sorting, and simplifying collected data), data display (presenting data in narratives and tables for clarity), and data verification (validating results with participants or additional sources as necessary). Conclusions were drawn through contextual interpretation, ensuring findings contribute to understanding the dynamics and challenges of religious pluralism, whether dynamic or hypocritical. The research aims to enhance understanding of the issues surrounding religious pluralism.

Results and Discussion

Religious Harmony and Hidden Tensions: A Comparison of Indonesia and Malaysia

Although the community coexists harmoniously, challenges remain. One example cited by interview participants in this study, specifically from interviews conducted with community members and leaders, the potential friction caused by interfaith marriages and the issue of pigs being released. However, the community was able to resolve these issues peacefully. In addition, although there is no significant friction, challenges remain

in terms of maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity, as well as in dealing with changing cultural practices.

From interviews with interfaith leaders, teachers and social activists conducted in August to September 2024, it appears that despite the image of pluralistic harmony in Gorontalo, real challenges remain. One cause of this discrepancy is the existence of stereotypes and prejudices against other religions, as expressed by village government officials and religious leaders. For example, one religious leader stated, “Although we try to live side by side, there is still a deep misunderstanding of each other’s beliefs.” In Gorontalo, while social life is generally positive, challenges remain, such as difficulties in building places of worship for non-Muslims. This shows that despite good intentions to achieve harmony, the reality on the ground is often very different.

In Malaysia, despite the constitutional commitment to religious freedom and tolerance, achieving religious harmony is significantly influenced by political and social factors. A notable example is the controversy surrounding the use of the term “Allah,” which has sparked intense discussions between the Islamic and Christian communities. This issue has led to the introduction of Islamic legislation, illustrating how political entities often exploit sensitive topics to garner support.

In addition, government policies that favour one religion also contribute to discontent among minority communities, which can create social tensions. This creates a discrepancy between the desired image of harmony and the challenges faced. To see a comparison of the two countries in the image of harmony of religious pluralism and the reality of the challenges is shown in table 1.

Table 1: The Image of Harmony of Religious Pluralism and the Reality of the Challenge

Aspects	Indonesia	Malaysia
Image of Harmony	Interfaith activities and community cooperation	The government claims harmony through the promotion of interfaith dialogue
	Promoted Moderation Village to maintain interfaith harmony	Places of worship of various religions, such as mosques, temples, and churches, stand close together
	Multicultural education that promotes harmonious interaction between students of different religions	Each ethnicity has its own traditions that are honoured through national celebrations such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri (Islam), Chinese New Year, and Deepavali Day (Hinduism).
The Real Challenge	Difficulty building houses of worship	Interference and manipulation of politicians, non-royal bodies and individuals promoting pluralism
	The absence of civil servant teachers for religious education for minority students.	There were movements of pluralism and liberalism stemming from human rights brought from the west as well as political sentiments that led to racial tensions.

Table 1 illustrates that both Indonesia and Malaysia are trying to build an image of interreligious harmony, although they face different challenges. In Indonesia, particularly in areas such as Gorontalo, interreligious interactions appear peaceful and demonstrate strong social cooperation. However, behind this positive image are persistent problems, including stereotypes and prejudices against other religions. Challenges such as difficulties in building places of worship, which particularly affect minority communities such as Buddhists, require attention. This information was obtained from interviews with interfaith leaders, teachers, and social activists conducted in March to April 2023, as well as from existing literature, including previous reports and research on religious pluralism in Indonesia. It shows that despite good intentions to achieve harmonious coexistence, various social and administrative obstacles stand in the way of realizing ideal pluralism.

In Malaysia, despite ongoing efforts to promote interreligious dialogue, achieving harmony has proven more challenging. This difficulty arises from the pluralism and liberalism movements emerging from various sectors, such as the human rights movement spearheaded by organizations like Sisters in Islam and The Malaysian Human Rights Commission (SUHAKAM). While ostensibly supportive of human rights, these movements often introduce Western-influenced perspectives and political sentiments that can exacerbate inter-tribal tensions. In addition, movements such as Bersih, which advocates for fair and transparent elections, are also sometimes perceived as a challenge to existing traditional norms. This situation shows that, despite good intentions to promote harmony, non-inclusive policies can further complicate the landscape of inter-religious relations.

Managing Diversity: The Politics of Religious Pluralism

The government and religious institutions significantly influence people's perspectives. In Indonesia, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is promoting a religious moderation program that is being communicated to all levels of society. In Gorontalo, religious leaders play a crucial role in maintaining peace and preventing conflict, as demonstrated by their involvement in various social and religious activities that encourage interfaith cooperation.

In Gorontalo, religious leaders are vital in maintaining peace and preventing conflict through their participation in social and religious activities that promote interfaith cooperation. The village head of Biawao, for example, initiated a pilot project from the Ministry of Religion to make his village a model of moderation. He stated that the active involvement of various religious communities in social activities and religious holiday celebrations strengthens social ties and fosters tolerance. Additionally, he organizes gatherings at places of worship to encourage interfaith communication, demonstrating a true commitment to managing diversity.

In Malaysia, religious institutions and government policies, with Islam as the official religion, often contribute to maintaining tension or conflict. Despite efforts to promote interfaith dialogue, there are movements advocating pluralism that challenge sensitivity and harmony in religious diversity. A representative from Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) noted in an interview that while Islam can serve as a foundation for harmony, a cautious approach to pluralism is necessary to preserve existing religious identities. Additionally, an academic expert with 20 years of experience in cult studies stated that the issue of pluralism in Malaysia is closely linked to politics, with certain parties manipulating the pluralism agenda to gain public support, ultimately jeopardizing harmony⁵⁰

This indicates that despite the commitment to dialog, political and social sensitivities pose a challenge in managing religious diversity in Malaysia. Table 2 compares the influence of government and religious institutions in the two countries, with data sources derived from interviews with informants in Gorontalo Indonesia and Negeri Sembilan Malaysia.

Table 2: Influence of Government and Religious Institutions

Aspects	Indonesia	Malaysia
Government Policy	Religious moderation program promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to promote harmony at the regional and community levels.	The establishment of institutions, Islamic religious positions, sharia crimes, and laws relating to religion, under the guidance of Ahli Sunnah wal Jamaah, aims to combat liberalism and pluralism, which are contrary to the teachings of Islam.
The Role of Religious Institutions	Religious institutions play an active role in maintaining peace through interfaith activities and moderation villages in Gorontalo.	Institutions, Mufti Officers, or religious offices are important in strengthening the religion and blocking pluralist agendas that can undermine harmony.
Example of a Program or Initiative	The Moderation Village in Biawao, Gorontalo, is a pilot project that involves religious leaders and interfaith communities in social activities.	Awareness sermons, interfaith dialogue, television shows such as Forum Perdana, Muhibbah concept engage the community, Wasatiyyah concept is moderate and not extreme.

Table 2 shows that despite the intentions and image of pluralistic harmony promoted by governments and communities in both countries, the reality often does not align with what occurs on the ground. In Indonesia, for example, Gorontalo faces administrative obstacles, particularly evident in the construction of houses of worship for minority communities. Despite efforts to foster harmony, these challenges hinder the ideal of inclusivity.

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, societal harmony is upheld by institutions and laws that protect Islam as the official religion and promote harmony within the country. Authorities such as the Jabatan Agama Islam play a crucial role in strengthening the religion and preventing pluralism and liberalism agendas that could undermine harmony. However,

it is undeniable that various movements and political agendas can threaten harmony in the religious life of diverse ethnicities and religions.

The results of this study show the politicization of religion in public policy and rhetoric, where political interests use religion to build legitimacy and gain support. In the context of this research, conducted in Indonesia and Malaysia, it was found that religion functions as both a cultural identity and a political tool. Politicians often promote policies that emphasize religious harmony and tolerance; however, discrimination and exclusivity remain prevalent in society. These findings are supported by interviews with religious leaders and social activists, as well as by existing literature. Examples include challenges in constructing houses of worship and accessing employment in Indonesia, along with Islamic policy preferences in Malaysia, which illustrate a rhetoric of harmony that does not always match reality. This highlights that policies often reflect political agendas rather than genuine efforts to promote pluralism.

In this context, “Civil Malaysia” can be compared to the concept of “religious moderation” in Indonesia, which also aims to create inter-religious harmony and reduce extremism. However, both face similar challenges in practice, where the policies and rhetoric often do not align with the reality of discrimination experienced by minority communities. Previous research shows that despite efforts to promote pluralism, discrimination and exclusivity remain issues that need to be addressed in both countries.⁵¹

Successes and Challenges of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia and Malaysia

Successful pluralism in Gorontalo is exemplified by harmonious interfaith activities, including celebrations and educational initiatives that promote inclusiveness. Schools like SDN 41 Hulontalangi and Santa Maria Junior High School showcase positive interactions among students from diverse religious backgrounds. Plural villages, such as Banuroja (Bali, Nusatenggara, Gorontalo, Java), Trirukun (three-religion village: Islam, Christianity, Hinduism), and Bohusami (Bolaang Mongondow, Hulontalo, Sangir, Minahasa), highlight adhesive identities. However, challenges persist, such as difficulties in constructing houses of worship for Catholic, Buddhists, and Hindu communities.

Christian leaders in Kaaruyan village emphasize the harmony of inter-religious life, despite the majority of the population being Christian. Conflicts that arise are typically short-lived due to a collective understanding that the community is like one family. During the Poso riots, when the Christian community considered leaving their hometown for their original village, they were detained by the Muslim community, highlighting the interconnectedness and mutual support among the residents.

“...when the Poso conflict erupted, we were so worried that we planned to flee to Tomohon for fear of experiencing the same thing. But the Gorontalo people, who are Muslims, forbade us from leaving Kaaruyan village. They claimed to be one family and guaranteed

the safety and security of the Christians."⁵²

The study's results indicate that strong social ties are crucial for maintaining peace. Additionally, the practice of inviting Muslim families to celebrations and providing halal catering demonstrates an effort to foster mutual understanding and respect for differences. This approach not only strengthens community bonds but also promotes inclusivity among diverse religious groups.

Hindu leaders have expressed that the challenges Hindus face in constructing places of worship stem from regulations requiring approval from the surrounding community. Although they successfully obtained permission to build a worship site within an army company, they had to adapt their worship practices to align with local conditions.

*"...our struggle to establish a house of worship did not go smoothly. Whereas Hindus scattered in Gorontalo city, Bonebolango and Gorontalo regency are very difficult to carry out worship. After we fulfilled the administrative requirements, suddenly 2 residents from Central Sulawesi protested the construction of a temple in Gorontalo City. Finally, the temple was moved to a military complex where there were several Hindu members of the TNI."*⁵³

Buddhists in the city have a magnificent place of worship; however, they face challenges due to a lack of civil servant teachers for Buddhist religious education. Despite having around 100 Buddhist students and a total of 700 Buddhists in the community, no Buddhist teachers or counselors have been appointed as civil servants.

*"Despite having approximately 100 Buddhist students, no Buddhist teachers have been appointed as civil servants. For instance, Mr. Waluyo, recognized as the best mobilizing teacher in Gorontalo, has not received the opportunity for such a position. Furthermore, in the Ministry of Religion, although there are around 700 Buddhists, there are no civil servant religious counselors. Efforts to communicate with the local government regarding this issue have not resulted in any follow-up."*⁵⁴

*"In Malaysia, there is a stronger emphasis on the concept of religious plurality rather than pluralism. An expert in akidah studies notes that many Muslim scholars do not agree with pluralism, highlighting that these are distinct perspectives. Religious plurality aligns with the Quran's teachings on religious fitrah, as expressed in the verse "La ikraha fi al-din," which signifies that individuals cannot be forced to accept a religion. Additionally, the verse "lakum dinikum waliyadin" in al-Kafirun underscores the acceptance of religious differences."*⁵⁵

The racial riot situation on 13 May 1969 triggered a conflict between racial associations in Malaysia which became a significant learning experience as it cost lives and property after the general election on 10 May 1969 until the declaration of the state of emergency. The issue of religion, the position and privileges of the Malays, and the Malay language became the main issues of contention.

The concept of goodwill established by the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Alhaj, the father of Malaysian independence, needs to be emphasized as the cornerstone for ensuring that individuals and society comply with the constitution and laws of Malaysia. This concept was introduced to foster respect, dialogue, and tolerance among different races. In recent years, interracial disputes have continued to arise, such as the controversy surrounding the use of the word “Allah,” which necessitates effective communication approaches and methods to resolve conflicts between races and religions. Therefore, it is essential to provide space and clarification regarding the use of the word “Allah,” as it is a sensitive term. According to experts in comparative religion:

“Leaders, politicians and citizens need to avoid extreme thinking. We need to stay away from the doctrines of liberalism and pluralism that can threaten the unity of society and deny the authority of the ulama. In Malaysia, there is a need to affirm that religious pluralism refers to the essence of philosophical ideologies that started in the west. We are concerned that people do not realise the difference between the concepts of pluralism and religious plurality.”⁵⁶

Interviews with ABIM representatives revealed that Anwar Ibrahim emphasised the importance of Islam as the foundation for building a harmonious society in Malaysia as CIVIL Malaysia. That is to build the unity of the Malaysian Nation to have pillars of life that are different in religion and culture. The pillars of Malaysia are the majority of Malay Muslims who need to lead the country by paying attention to a pluralistic society with religious diversity. Therefore, various approaches are taken such as da’wah approach, the cross-cultural approach, as well as respect for the construction of places of worship for different religions.

According to an interview with a panel of experts on Sufism at the Department of Islamic Religious Affairs, which is also a panel of experts on Akidah and Sharia, the task of bringing religious harmony is the responsibility of all parties, especially those who hold authority and are experts in the field:

“Our job is to give understanding to the community to hold fast to religion. In Malaysia, we see that we are still in a safe condition because we have laws because if the form of pluralism agenda and provocation that endangers and threatens the welfare of the community, then the individual can be punished. For example, issues related to the 3Rs namely Religion, Race and Royalty, the authorities will quickly take action.”⁵⁷

The results of this study show that despite efforts to promote pluralism in both Indonesia and Malaysia, challenges remain and require a more inclusive and equitable approach to create true harmony in society. The study, conducted through interviews with religious leaders and social activists in both countries, revealed that in this context pluralism approaches that emphasize religious equality are considered to challenge existing religious identities. Interfaith dialogue in Malaysia is still constrained by social norms and government policies.⁵⁸ Despite efforts for dialogue, tensions and divergent

views remain strong. According to ABIM, Ustaz Siddiq Fadzil emphasized the importance of promoting the unity of the Malaysian nation through harmony within a culture of peace. In this context, cosmopolitan Islam is viewed as a force to lead a diverse society by valuing differences. Table 3 presents a stark comparison between Indonesia and Malaysia regarding the success or failure of religious pluralism in social practice, assessed based on data from interviews, previous research reports and existing policy analysis. These sources provide the necessary context to understand the challenges and successes of pluralism in both countries.

Table 3: Examples of Success or Failure of Religious Pluralism in Social Practice

Aspects	Indonesia	Malaysia
Example of Success	In Gorontalo, celebration and social activities involve interfaith communities	Malaysian institutions and laws as well as alternative efforts such as interfaith dialogue are in place to promote tolerance.
	SDN 41 Hulontalangi dan SMP Santa Maria mempromosikan interaksi antar siswa dari berbagai agama	Efforts are made to foster interactions between communities through both informal means, like interracial interactions, and formal avenues, such as forums and media-designed programs.
	Plural villages such as Banuroja, Trirukun and Bohusami strengthen the identity of harmony.	Respect national festivals; Hari Raya Aidilfitri (Islam), Chinese New Year and Deepavali
Failure Example	Difficulties in building houses of worship for Catholics and Hindus	Intervention of political agenda to gain support and manipulation to gain support
	A shortage of civil servant teachers for Buddhist religious education for Buddhist students.	Manipulation of political sentiment and media/entertainment that injects dangerous ideas about pluralism and liberalism.

Table 3 shows that the success of pluralism in Gorontalo, Indonesia, is evident in social interactions and inclusive education. Interfaith activities and multicultural school initiatives reflect the community’s commitment to maintaining harmony, similar to efforts in Europe through education⁵⁹. However, challenges such as obstacles in building houses of worship and a shortage of Buddhist religious teachers still hinder the achievement of harmony. Gorontalo has unique characteristics in creating harmonious religious pluralism, distinguishing it from other regions. Two values of local wisdom, “*ungalaa*” (kinship) and “*mo’awota*” (kinship), serve as the glue for interfaith harmony and promote a sense of brotherhood, particularly evident in the practice of intermarriage. However, there are dynamics in leadership that create tension; although the adat philosophy of “*adat bersendi syara’, syara’ bersendi kitabullah*”⁶⁰ requires local leaders to be Muslim, the situation resembles politics in Malaysia, where Islam is the official religion and leadership positions are restricted to Muslims.

Meanwhile, in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, the study results indicated the interference of political agendas aimed at gaining support and manipulation. This situation led some individuals to adopt extreme opinions to influence others. Malaysia employs various methods to promote religious harmony. In addition to Islam being the official religion, worship spaces for different religions are also respected. Interfaith dialogue continues as a formal method. However, study participants expressed the view that overall, harmony in Malaysia remains at a very good level, as people of different nationalities and religions still interact harmoniously. Thus, both Indonesia and Malaysia face their own challenges. Therefore, more inclusive efforts are needed so that pluralism in Indonesia and religious plurality in Malaysia become not only ideals but also realities that can be experienced by the entire community.

Research shows that despite efforts to promote tolerance and harmony, difficulties in building houses of worship and the need for religious teachers for minority religious students often hinder access for minority groups. Research by Zainuddin⁶¹ and Peletz⁶² shows that this issue creates tension amidst a public image of openness. This situation demonstrates the duality between good intentions in formal policies and structural barriers that stand in the way of genuine pluralism. While policies reflect a commitment to pluralism, the reality on the ground often reveals significant challenges for minority communities. Values of tolerance are often verbalized without real implementation.⁶³ In both countries, the politicization of religion poses a major challenge to creating harmonious pluralism. Research by Zainuddin⁶⁴ and Kurniawan⁶⁵ emphasizes that the interaction between religious teachings and political interests often creates complex problems, where dominant groups resist the concept of religious pluralism. Hasyim notes that some religious authorities seek to revisit and oppose pluralism through fatwas, further complicating the situation.⁶⁶ Additionally, factors related to colonial history and existing government policies also contribute to the management of religious pluralism. Camilleri explains that the political journey in Malaysia reveals the dynamics involved in addressing pluralism.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Indonesia and Malaysia are often seen as examples of countries with harmonious religious diversity. However, beneath this image, there are challenges that threaten social stability. In Indonesia, despite effective interfaith cooperation, difficulties in building houses of worship and the shortage of civil servant teachers for minority religious students persist, which, at certain points, lead to interfaith tensions. Meanwhile, Malaysia faces different challenges. The approach of emphasizing religious plurality rather than pluralism is viewed as harmful to societal understanding, especially when certain politicians or individuals manipulate religious narratives and sentiments to disrupt social welfare and gain support.

Political interests in Indonesia and Malaysia often use religion to build legitimacy and gain support. Although politicians emphasize the importance of harmony and tolerance, practices on the ground still reveal discrimination and exclusivity, such as the challenges in building houses of worship in Indonesia. In Malaysia, although Islam is the official religion, other religions are also respected by the Malaysian Constitution, which upholds prosperity and mutual respect in society.

Achieving true pluralism requires not only formal policies but also a genuine commitment to honoring and celebrating diversity. Interestingly, religious pluralism in both countries is often more rhetoric than reality, making it essential to formulate concrete steps to overcome hypocrisy and realize true harmony. Firstly, there is a need to improve inclusive policies that are felt by all communities. Secondly, continuous multicultural education should be implemented, focusing not only on tolerance but also on a deep understanding of differences. Thirdly, it is important to strengthen mediation and dialogue institutions to address religious-based social conflicts.

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