# Indonesian Moderate Islam: A Constructivist Approach to Global Perceptions

**Halifa Haqqi**
halifa.haqqi@unisri.ac.id

International Relations, Slamet Riyadi University, Indonesia

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***Abstract***

*This study explores the construction of Moderate Islam in Indonesia and its significance for both national identity and foreign policy. As part of its strategic positioning, Indonesia actively promotes itself as a Moderate Muslim nation to counter radicalism and extremism, aligning this narrative with its commitment to tolerance and democracy. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach within a constructivist framework, this research examines policy documents, academic studies, and governmental reports to analyze the roles of state and non-state actors—including Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—in shaping and advancing the discourse of Moderate Islam through multi-track diplomacy. The findings indicate that Moderate Islam in Indonesia is not a static or preordained identity but rather an evolving construct shaped by historical, political, and sociocultural interactions. A paradox emerges as the state's official narratives often fail to align with social realities, particularly concerning issues of intolerance and discrimination. The instrumentalization of Moderate Islam for political purposes raises critical concerns regarding inclusivity and representation. This study contributes to constructivist international relations theory by demonstrating how religious norms influence state behavior and shape diplomatic engagement. It further argues that policy reforms are necessary to bridge the gap between diplomatic rhetoric and domestic realities, ensuring that the discourse on Moderate Islam functions not only as a strategic tool of soft power but also as an authentic reflection of societal values.*

## I. Introduction

Indonesia is home to approximately 229 million Muslims, accounting for 13% of the global Muslim population. As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Islam constitutes 87% of Indonesia's total population. Any discussion of religion in Indonesia must acknowledge the extensive diversity both among Muslims and between Muslims and adherents of other faiths (Abdurrohman, 2018). This diversity stems from historical trajectories, as even during the time of Prophet Muhammad, differing interpretations and sects emerged within Islam. Consequently, various labels have been ascribed to Islam, ranging from positive connotations such as liberal, progressive, moderate, and modernist, to more contentious ones, including radical, fundamentalist, militant, and jihadist Islam (Zamimah, 2018).

The categorization of Islam through such terminologies presents challenges to the unity of the Islamic community, while also contributing to the risk of sectarian and ideological divisions (Bakry et al., 2017). Given the complexities of social interaction, these diverse Islamic identities must be accommodated within the broader social fabric. In Indonesia, a prevailing discourse centers on the notion of Moderate Islam, which is deeply embedded in the country's cultural and institutional frameworks. This discourse not only plays a critical role in shaping religious narratives domestically but also serves as a key component of Indonesia's diplomatic identity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018). At the core of this diplomatic approach is the promotion of Moderate Islam as a platform for global peace, aligning with broader Islamic principles while also influencing international relations.

Historically, Islam has played a limited role in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy (Nilhakim, 2021). Prior to 1998, under the administrations of Sukarno and Suharto, Islamic influence on diplomacy remained minimal. In fact, before the late 1980s, the Indonesian government deliberately downplayed religious identity to maintain a neutral and secular stance in its foreign policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018). This approach shifted in the early 2000s, as Islamic influence within Indonesia's global engagements became more pronounced. A pivotal moment in this transformation was the meeting of the Indonesian Council on World Affairs (ICWA) in Jakarta on May 19, 2005, where President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) articulated the role of Islamic identity in Indonesia's foreign policy. This marked the formal integration of Moderate Islam into Indonesia's diplomatic roadmap, gaining international recognition (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018).

Since then, Indonesia has positioned itself as a mediator between Islamic and Western perspectives, projecting an image of Islam that is moderate, tolerant, and

democratic. This sets Indonesia apart from Middle Eastern countries, which often lean towards ultra-conservatism or experience governance challenges linked to theocracy, as in Iran, or secularism, as in Turkey. Indonesia's unique ideological foundation, Pancasila, has played a central role in shaping its national identity and cultural dynamics (Zulfadli, 2022). In line with this ideological framework, Islamic education in Indonesia fosters an inclusive interpretation of Islam that emphasizes tolerance, peace, and democracy. Nonetheless, despite its strong commitment to moderation, the country continues to confront challenges posed by religious radicalism and extremism, which threaten the concept of Moderate Islam.

According to the Global Terrorism Index, published by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), Indonesia ranks as the third most terrorism-affected country in the Asia-Pacific region, with a terrorism impact score of 5.502 (Annur, 2023). In response, Indonesia has prioritized deradicalization efforts through dialogue, community engagement, and the promotion of peaceful interpretations of Islam. These efforts aim to strengthen the narrative of Moderate Islam as both a pillar of national stability and a soft power instrument for international legitimacy.

Despite being the country with the largest Muslim-majority population in the world, Indonesia remains underrepresented in global Islamic studies. The Middle East continues to be regarded as the epicenter of Islamic scholarship, while Southeast Asia—particularly Indonesia—is often marginalized or perceived as peripheral to mainstream Islamic discourse (Abdurrohman, 2018). This marginalization has implications for the global recognition of Indonesia's distinctive Islamic traditions. Recent scholarly efforts have sought to redefine Indonesia's position within the global Islamic paradigm. Abdurrohman, (2018) traces the roots of Moderate Islam in contemporary Indonesia to the traditions of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), both of which emphasize social harmony and tolerance. Akmaliah, (2020) explores the counter-discourse on Islamic moderation facilitated by new media, while Alvian and Ardhani (2023) analyze how the Indonesian government strategically leverages the Moderate Islam narrative in response to international pressures and domestic political dynamics.

Given Indonesia's immense religious diversity and its significant engagement in Islamic diplomacy, the study of Islam in Indonesia warrants greater global academic attention. In Indonesia, Islam is not merely a theological construct but also a socio-political force that mediates between internal governance and international diplomacy. Therefore, any rigorous analysis of the conceptualization and promotion of Moderate Islam—both nationally and globally—must consider its broader implications for contemporary Islamic thought and international relations.

## II. Objective

This study aims to examine the construction of Moderate Islam in Indonesia and its implications for both national identity and foreign policy. Specifically, it seeks to analyze how state and non-state actors, including governmental institutions, religious organizations, and civil society, contribute to shaping and promoting the discourse of Moderate Islam in domestic and international contexts. By employing a constructivist approach, this research explores the evolving nature of Moderate Islam as a socio-political construct rather than a fixed ideological identity.

This study investigates the strategic utilization of Moderate Islam as a soft power tool in Indonesia's diplomatic engagements. It critically assesses the extent to which the state's official narratives align with social realities, particularly concerning inclusivity, tolerance, and the instrumentalization of religious discourse for political purposes. By evaluating the role of Moderate Islam in Indonesia's multi-track diplomacy, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on religious moderation, identity politics, and international relations. This study aspires to provide policy recommendations to bridge the gap between rhetorical commitments to Moderate Islam and their practical implementation. By highlighting both the strengths and limitations of Indonesia's approach, the research aims to offer insights into how religious narratives can be effectively integrated into governance and diplomatic frameworks while ensuring authenticity, representation, and long-term sustainability.

## III. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in constructivist theory, which posits that identities, norms, and social realities are dynamically shaped through historical, political, and sociocultural interactions. In this context, the construction and projection of Moderate Islam in Indonesia involve three key dimensions: actors, mechanisms of construction, and outcomes & challenges. The first dimension, actors, consists of state actors—primarily the Indonesian government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—which institutionalize Moderate Islam through national policies and diplomatic engagements. Non-state actors, such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and civil society organizations, play a crucial role in shaping and disseminating the narrative of Moderate Islam through religious education, community programs, and international collaborations. The second dimension, mechanisms of construction, refers to the various strategies used to establish and promote Moderate Islam. These include domestic policies, such as religious education and deradicalization programs, which reinforce religious moderation at the national level. Diplomatic engagement through multi-track diplomacy and international partnerships

positions Indonesia as a global advocate of Moderate Islam, distinguishing its model from more conservative interpretations found in other Muslim-majority countries. Media and public discourse, including mass media, academic scholarship, and interfaith dialogues, serve as platforms for expanding and legitimizing the narrative of Moderate Islam. The third dimension, outcomes and challenges, highlights the broader impact and potential limitations of this framework. The domestic impact of Moderate Islam includes its role in strengthening national identity and fostering interreligious harmony. On the international stage, Indonesia leverages Moderate Islam as a soft power tool to enhance its diplomatic influence and gain global recognition as a model for religious tolerance. Significant challenges remain, including the instrumentalization of Moderate Islam for political purposes, discrepancies between state rhetoric and social realities, and global skepticism regarding the authenticity of Indonesia's moderation narrative. By integrating these three dimensions, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of how Indonesia constructs and projects Moderate Islam, both as a national identity and as a strategic diplomatic asset. It further explores the implications of this framework in shaping religious policies, governance, and international relations.

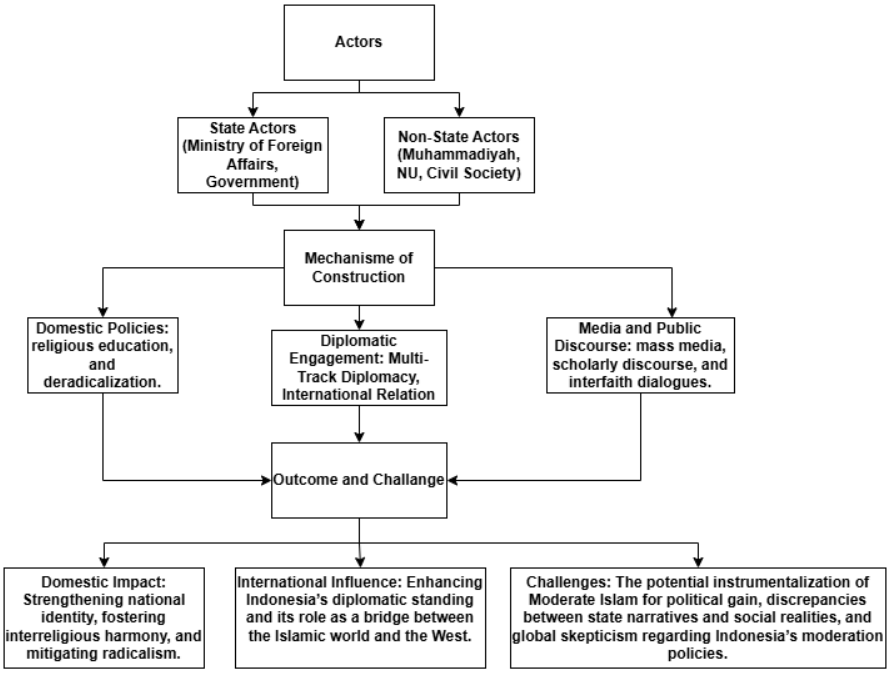



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework: Construction and Projection of Moderate Islam in Indonesia

## IV. Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the dynamic interaction of social phenomena in constructing and projecting Moderate Islam in Indonesia. Accordingly, an interpretative analysis is required to uncover latent patterns and interactions, given the fluidity and evolution of political and religious discourses. This research undertakes a strategic analysis that identifies the primary driving forces behind global perceptions of Indonesia's Moderate Islam, placing them within their contemporary context. Consequently, this approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the key actors shaping this discourse.

The selected explanatory research design complements the descriptive qualitative method due to its suitability in addressing the study's core questions. Rather than relying on quantitative data, this methodological framework emphasizes the collection and interpretation of diverse, dynamic political and religious narratives within a qualitative descriptive format. Qualitative research offers a deeper and more nuanced understanding of shifts in Indonesia's Islamic diplomacy, providing a holistic and scientifically rigorous analysis. Data for this study were primarily obtained through a literature review, which serves as the most effective means of constructing a well-founded discussion aligned with the research objectives.

This study adopts constructivism as its analytical framework to examine the domestic construction and global projection of Moderate Islam through Indonesia's foreign policy and diplomatic engagements. Constructivism, a widely used approach in political science and international relations, posits that identities, norms, and social realities are not fixed but are continuously shaped by social interactions, discourse, and historical processes. Accordingly, this study employs constructivist theory and identity politics to analyze the concept of Moderate Islam in Indonesia, focusing on both state and non-state actors. These actors include the Indonesian government, religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, and civil society groups that play crucial roles in propagating this narrative both domestically and internationally.

This research ultimately explores the utilization of Moderate Islam as a diplomatic tool by Indonesia to portray itself as a moderate and tolerant Muslim-majority nation. It investigates how Indonesia implements multi-track diplomacy through its religious identity to enhance its global influence. From a constructivist perspective, this study provides valuable insights into the dual function of Moderate Islam as both a domestic identity and a foreign policy instrument aimed at reinforcing Indonesia's international standing.

## Data Collection and Validation

The selection of literature for this study adhered to a rigorous validation process to ensure authenticity and scholarly integrity. Several critical steps were undertaken to maintain academic rigor and reliability. First, the sources were carefully chosen from peer-reviewed academic journals, scholarly books, official government reports, and reputable organizations specializing in Islamic studies and international relations, ensuring their relevance and credibility. The study prioritized the citation of primary sources, guaranteeing that all quoted data — whether derived from primary or secondary literature — originated from academically credible works on Moderate Islam, Indonesian diplomacy, and the global construction of Islamic identity. To uphold high academic standards, journal articles were exclusively selected from reputable, peer-reviewed publications. Furthermore, a multisource comparison was conducted through cross-referencing across multiple sources, effectively mitigating single-source bias and ensuring a well-rounded interpretation of the data. This meticulous process underscores the study's commitment to academic integrity and comprehensive analysis.

To further enhance methodological rigor, a systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted following a structured selection process (Thomas & Harden, 2008) . First, a comprehensive literature search was performed using academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and nationally indexed journals listed in SINTA to gather relevant scholarly materials. To maintain the relevance of the content, inclusion criteria were applied, prioritizing studies published within the last ten years, particularly those focusing on Moderate Islam, Indonesian foreign policy, Islamic diplomacy, and constructivist studies, with a preference for works published by reputable academic institutions and research organizations. Simultaneously, exclusion criteria were enforced to systematically eliminate articles exhibiting political bias, weak methodological foundations, personal blog entries, non-credible media sources, or those lacking direct relevance to the research topic. Finally, a content-based screening process was conducted through in-depth content analysis to ensure that all referenced works aligned with established theoretical frameworks and research objectives, further strengthening the validity and reliability of the selected literature (Liberati et al., 2009);(Moher et al., 2009).

A critical examination of the available literature was conducted to identify and address potential biases. Several key aspects were systematically considered (Liberati et al., 2009). First, geographical bias is evident in the dominance of Middle Eastern perspectives in scholarly discourse on Moderate Islam, often overlooking the unique characteristics of Indonesia's Islamic traditions. This study seeks to fill this gap by highlighting Indonesia's distinctive approach to Moderate Islam and its global projection. Second, ideological bias emerges in contemporary studies that tend to

present nationalist or liberal interpretations of Islam, potentially oversimplifying the complexities of Moderate Islam within social and political contexts. To achieve a more balanced and nuanced analysis, this research incorporates diverse perspectives. Third, government bias is apparent in official sources that frequently emphasize the successes of Indonesia's Moderate Islam diplomacy while neglecting internal challenges. This study critically evaluates both achievements and limitations to ensure a more comprehensive analysis. Fourth, temporal bias arises as much of the research on Moderate Islam has been produced in the past decade, potentially overlooking broader historical processes. To bridge this gap, this study integrates recent developments with their historical foundations, providing a more contextualized understanding (Moher et al., 2009) . Lastly, access bias is a concern due to the dominance of subscription-based academic journals, which may restrict the scope of research. To ensure inclusivity, this study incorporates insights from local scholars, independent research institutions, and civil society organizations, ensuring a diverse range of voices and perspectives is represented. By systematically addressing these biases, this study presents a comprehensive and objective assessment of Indonesia's Moderate Islam, examining its role both in the international arena and within domestic contexts.

## V. Result

Moderate Islam, as a doctrinal framework, frequently stands in contrast to other interpretations of Islam that have historically been at odds with one another. Throughout different epochs in the development of Islamic thought, these competing interpretations have shaped the religious, social, and political landscape, contributing to the evolving identity of Muslim societies. In Indonesia, diverse Islamic perspectives often lead to ideological contestations between competing narratives that seek to define Islam's role in civil life. The global rise of radicalism, violence, and terrorism has intensified international discourse on the necessity of religious moderation as a means to foster peace and cooperation.

While interpretative differences and varying labels exist, Islam can be understood as a comprehensive and unified religious system grounded in the teachings of the Qur'an. The Qur'an itself attests to the fundamental mission, ethical principles, and moral values that shape Muslim communities. Islam upholds core values such as human dignity (fitrah), moderation (ummatan wasatan), truth (hanif), justice ('adlalah), and righteousness (khaira ummah) (Abdurrohman, 2018). These principles form the theological basis of Islamic moderation, which has been widely acknowledged by scholars (ulama) and has given rise to the concept that Islam inherently seeks balance (tawashut) in both religious and social affairs. In this context, such doctrinal foundations have played a crucial role in shaping Indonesia's approach to religious tolerance. They serve as a key pillar of Indonesia's diplomatic efforts in promoting the global discourse on Moderate

Islam. Indonesia's engagement in international platforms reflects an effort to project its unique model of Islamic moderation as a counter-narrative to extremism, reinforcing its role as a proponent of religious harmony in the global arena.

## Construction of Moderate Islam in Indonesia

The discourse on Moderate Islam in Indonesia is shaped by the intellectual trajectories and political dynamics of various national figures. The debate surrounding Moderate Islam gained significant momentum following the 1998 democratic reforms and has since attracted growing international attention. The 2002 Bali Bombing further intensified global scrutiny of Indonesia's Islamic landscape, reinforcing narratives that associate Islam with violence, terrorism, and radicalism (Anditya, 2017). The challenge became even more pronounced as perpetrators of such acts often justified their actions through religious rhetoric. This reality spurred extensive domestic debates, particularly regarding the emergence of extremist elements within Indonesia's diverse Islamic environment. Meanwhile, the War on Terror, launched by Western powers in response to global terrorism, was met with skepticism in Indonesia. Many viewed it as an unjust campaign that disproportionately targeted Muslim-majority countries and reinforced negative stereotypes of Islam (Alvian & Ardhani, 2023).

This perception is further influenced by religious doctrines and ideological constructs. Western observers often interpret violent Islamic movements as manifestations of fanaticism and radicalism without fully acknowledging the socio-political and economic grievances that contribute to radicalization (Faqihuddin, 2021). While political grievances and structural inequalities are crucial factors in extremism, distorted belief systems and interpretative frameworks remain central to international counterterrorism discourses. In response, Indonesia has actively positioned itself as a leading proponent of Moderate Islam, arguing that terrorism stems from extremist misinterpretations rather than Islamic teachings. By advocating for Moderate Islam, Indonesia aims to foster social harmony and reinforce its status as a global model for religious tolerance.

Identity formation is a dynamic process shaped by historical experiences, discursive frameworks, and social interactions (Dormer, 2017). Unlike realist theories that emphasize material power or liberal perspectives that highlight institutional structures, constructivism underscores the role of social norms and collective identities in shaping political behavior. Indonesia has deliberately cultivated its global image as a moderate Islamic state, presenting itself as distinct from radical or authoritarian interpretations of Islam. Consequently, the promotion of Moderate Islam serves both as a domestic strategy for national

cohesion and as a diplomatic instrument in global engagement.

The intellectual foundation of Indonesia's Moderate Islam has been significantly shaped by influential thinkers such as Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) and Nurcholish Madjid. Gus Dur advocated for a pluralistic and democratic interpretation of Islam that safeguards national ideology while promoting cultural and religious harmony (Anditya, 2017). His ideas laid the groundwork for the development of Islamic democracy in Indonesia, emphasizing that Islam does not inherently conflict with democratic governance. Similarly, Nurcholish Madjid introduced concepts of secularization and inclusivism, arguing that Islam accommodates pluralism and coexistence with other faiths (Bakry et al., 2017). This ideological framework contributes to Indonesia's unique Islamic identity—neither ultra-conservative nor entirely secular, but adaptive, integrating religious traditions with modern democratic principles.

Scholarly discourse on Moderate Islam has consistently highlighted its defining characteristics, including justice, balance, tolerance, benevolence, inclusivity, and resistance to extremism (Khamim, 2022; Novianto, 2021; Sartika, 2021).. As a counter-narrative to radicalism, Moderate Islam offers an alternative approach that navigates between textual fundamentalism and excessive contextualization. It seeks to reconcile scriptural integrity with contemporary realities, ensuring that Islamic governance and social policies remain relevant (Yulianto, 2020).

Since 2018, the institutionalization of Moderate Islam has been further reinforced through state policies and religious discourse, particularly under the conceptual framework of 'Islam Nusantara' (Archipelagic Islam). This Indonesian interpretation of Islam emphasizes tolerance, cultural diversity, and adherence to Pancasila as the national ideology. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has played a pivotal role in promoting this concept, positioning Islam Nusantara as a distinctive model of religious moderation that aligns with Indonesia's constitutional principles and multicultural identity (Radiani & Rusli, 1970). This initiative aligns with Indonesia's diplomatic strategy, reinforcing its global leadership in religious moderation.

From a political science perspective, Indonesia's Moderate Islam serves as a case study in identity formation and norm diffusion. This evolving narrative enhances Indonesia's political and diplomatic credibility by constructing a national identity that aligns with its vision of a moderate Islamic state (Dormer, 2017). Consequently, Indonesia has emerged as a key player in international diplomacy, advocating religious tolerance while countering extremism in both domestic and global contexts.

Key political and religious figures have been instrumental in institutionalizing Moderate Islam. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) played a significant role in integrating moderate Islamic principles into Indonesia's foreign policy and domestic governance. Together with Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab, he incorporated Islamic moderation into Indonesia's diplomatic engagements, reinforcing the country's identity as a proponent of religious tolerance and pluralism (Bakry et al., 2017). This approach transformed Moderate Islam from a theological concept into a national identity and diplomatic strategy, aligning Indonesia's religious character with democratic governance and international cooperation.

From a constructivist perspective, identity formation is a socially constructed and historically contingent process. Constructivist scholars argue that identity emerges through social interactions, collective narratives, and institutional frameworks rather than being inherently fixed (Dormer, 2017). Unlike rationalist approaches that focus on material power and strategic interests, constructivism highlights how social actors and institutions shape Indonesia's diplomatic stance through the promotion of Moderate Islam.

The two most prominent civil society organizations contributing to the construction of Moderate Islam in Indonesia are Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). These organizations have been at the forefront of advocating religious moderation, social harmony, and political engagement (Akmaliah, 2020). Despite their differing theological and ideological traditions, both Muhammadiyah and NU have played a crucial role in promoting Islamic moderation across educational, social, and political spheres (Khamim, 2022). Their influence extends beyond religious discourse to policy advocacy and diplomatic engagement, strengthening Indonesia's global reputation as a moderate Muslim-majority country.

The promotion of Moderate Islam is closely tied to Indonesia's broader diplomatic approach, particularly in international relations and religious diplomacy. Intergovernmental dialogues, institutional networks, and international forums—many of which are supported by Muhammadiyah and NU—serve as platforms for the diffusion of moderate Islamic norms. These organizations actively contribute to shaping Indonesia's foreign policy narratives, reinforcing the country's diplomatic identity.

Indonesia's strategic application of Moderate Islam in foreign policy offers several advantages. First, it serves as a soft-power tool that facilitates engagement between Islamic and Western perspectives, fostering collaboration on religious tolerance, counterterrorism, and interfaith dialogue. Second, it positions Indonesia as a mediator in global Islamic affairs, distinguishing its approach from

that of more conservative or sectarian Islamic states. Finally, the institutionalization of Moderate Islam strengthens Indonesia's domestic governance framework, ensuring that Islamic values remain compatible with democratic principles and human rights (Purwono & Mas'oed, 2018). By embedding Moderate Islam into its foreign policy framework, Indonesia has successfully crafted a diplomatic identity that aligns with its national interests. This strategy underscores the significance of norms and shared beliefs in shaping foreign policy behavior, demonstrating how an alternative Islamic identity can be leveraged to enhance diplomatic engagement and global influence.

**Moderate Islamic Actors in Indonesia**

The long-standing presence and institutionalization of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as civil society organizations have played a pivotal role in sustaining Indonesia's narrative of Moderate Islam. Their extensive networks and institutional frameworks have facilitated the dissemination of moderate Islamic values both domestically and internationally. Through various programs and initiatives, these organizations have further solidified Indonesia's reputation as a model of religious tolerance, positioning the country as a potential benchmark for Islamic moderation on a global scale (Khamim, 2022).

From a constructivist perspective, identity formation is a dynamic and socially constructed process that differs significantly from rationalist approaches, which often overlook the complex interplay of agency and historical contingency. Identity is shaped through shared beliefs, social interactions, and institutional engagements, all of which contribute to an actor's role in domestic governance and international diplomacy (Dormer, 2017). In this context, proponents of Moderate Islam in Indonesia have consistently aligned themselves with democratic principles, viewing democracy as an essential mechanism for ensuring good governance and fostering religious harmony. Prior to the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998, moderate Muslim groups played a limited role in the political sphere; Their involvement expanded significantly during the post-Reform Era, as they actively contributed to shaping Indonesia's sociopolitical landscape (Budi Hapsari, 2018). This critical juncture marked the institutionalization of Moderate Islam as a guiding framework for both domestic policy and international diplomatic engagement.

The promotion of Moderate Islam is intricately linked to Indonesia's broader diplomatic strategy, particularly in the realm of international relations and religious diplomacy. Various platforms—including intergovernmental forums, institutional dialogues, and transnational networks, many of which are supported by Muhammadiyah and NU—serve as conduits for advancing the discourse on moderate Islamic values. The engagement of these organizations in global Islamic

debates enhances Indonesia's influence in shaping international policy narratives on religious moderation.

The strategic application of Moderate Islam within Indonesia's foreign policy framework presents several advantages. First, it serves as a key instrument of soft power, enabling Indonesia to bridge Islamic and Western perspectives in fostering international cooperation on issues such as religious tolerance, counter-terrorism, and interfaith dialogue. Second, it positions Indonesia as a credible mediator in global Islamic affairs, distinguishing the country from more conservative or sectarian-leaning Islamic states. Third, the institutionalization of Moderate Islam strengthens Indonesia's internal governance structures, ensuring the integration of Islamic principles with democratic values and human rights (Purwono and Mas'oed 2018).

By embedding Moderate Islam into its foreign policy discourse, Indonesia has cultivated a diplomatic identity that aligns with its national interests while resonating with broader international norms. This approach underscores the critical role of shared values and normative frameworks in shaping foreign policy behavior, demonstrating how religious identity can be leveraged as a strategic asset for diplomatic engagement and global influence.

**Moderate Islam in Indonesian Foreign Relations**

Within the framework of Indonesia's foreign policy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has actively promoted Moderate Islam as a key pillar of the country's diplomatic identity. This narrative has contributed to constructing Indonesia's global image as a champion of religious tolerance and pluralism. While Indonesia's interpretation of Islam is widely recognized as peaceful, democratic, and inclusive, evolving global political dynamics have prompted shifts in the international perception of its religious moderation. Despite efforts to institutionalize the values of Moderate Islam, the discourse has faced increasing scrutiny and criticism. A key concern is the noticeable gap between the government's official rhetoric on Moderate Islam and the socio-political realities on the ground. Incidents of religious intolerance, discrimination against minority groups, and faith-based violence persist, indicating that the principles of religious moderation have not been fully internalized at the societal level.

The instrumentalization of the Moderate Islam narrative for political purposes has been met with skepticism. Some critics argue that the government selectively employs this notion to marginalize conservative Islamic opposition groups, reinforcing the perception that Moderate Islam is an elite construct that does not fully represent the broader spectrum of Indonesian Muslim communities. Concerns have been raised regarding the potential use of Moderate Islam as a means to suppress

progressive or critical Islamic voices under the pretext of maintaining political stability and social cohesion. These domestic challenges contribute to short-term instability in Indonesia's religious moderation discourse, even as the government continues its efforts to position itself as a global model of Islamic tolerance.

A significant case study illustrating these tensions is the "Defending Islam Action" on November 11, 2016, which garnered international attention and further raised questions about the resilience of Indonesia's moderation narrative (Anditya, 2017). While global media outlets remain skeptical about the consistency and effectiveness of Indonesia's Moderate Islam policy, this skepticism has not substantially altered Indonesia's strategic positioning in international political discourse. The government remains committed to preserving its international image and reinforcing liberal.

Indonesia's promotion of Moderate Islam reflects an effort to reconcile Islamic principles with democratic values, yet the broader global discourse on the compatibility of Islam and democracy remains contested. Traditionally, Asia has been regarded as a central hub of Islamic civilization; Democratic consolidation in the region has faced recurring setbacks, raising questions about the viability of Islamic governance models that align with democratic norms.

Studies on Islam and democracy in the post-Arab Spring era highlight how socio-economic liberalization, globalization, and political fragmentation have shaped ongoing struggles against authoritarianism in the Middle East. More than a decade after the Arab uprisings, sectarian divisions, ethnic rivalries, and political instability continue to hinder democratic progress in many countries. Observers often regard democratic advancements in the region with skepticism, given the persistence of internal conflicts and governance challenges (Zulfadli, 2022). In contrast, Indonesia—despite experiencing domestic tensions—has managed to maintain a pluralistic democratic framework while upholding religious moderation.

Critical scholarship on the relationship between Islam and democracy has gained traction among both Muslim and Western scholars. These scholars emphasize the need to contextualize Islamic governance within specific cultural and historical settings, rather than reducing it to ideological binaries (Zulfadli, 2022). Indonesia has actively engaged in international forums to entrench its Moderate Islam narrative, leveraging platforms such as the ASEAN Summit, the Bali Democracy Forum, and the Arab Islamic American Summit to promote its model of Islamic moderation as a global peacebuilding strategy. Indonesia has hosted the International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders, reinforcing its diplomatic role in shaping global discourse on religious tolerance and democratic governance (Anditya, 2017).

Empirical data support Indonesia's Moderate Islam diplomacy and its success in fostering a favorable global image. A Pew Research Center survey on religious

tolerance in Muslim-majority nations positioned Indonesia as one of the most tolerant, surpassing many Middle Eastern countries in terms of religious pluralism. The Global Terrorism Index (GTI) underscores the ongoing security challenges, ranking Indonesia as the most terrorism-affected country in the Asia-Pacific region, with a score of 5.502. Meanwhile, the Democracy Index 2023 classifies Indonesia as a "Flawed Democracy" with a score of 6.71, which, while imperfect, still surpasses the democratic rankings of many other Muslim-majority states. These indicators illustrate Indonesia's complex duality, wherein aspirations for religious moderation and democratic consolidation coexist with persistent security and governance concerns.

Beyond state-led initiatives, civil society organizations have played a critical role in advancing Indonesia's Moderate Islam agenda. Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) serve as key actors in this process, leveraging their vast networks of educational and healthcare institutions, as well as community programs, to embed moderate Islamic values within Indonesian society. With more than 170 universities, 30,000 schools, and 400 hospitals under their administration, these organizations significantly contribute to the sociopolitical institutionalization of religious moderation in Indonesia. Their efforts reinforce Indonesia's position as a model of Islamic moderation, demonstrating how religion can serve as a vehicle for democratic consolidation and social development.

The Indonesian government continues to emphasize that Moderate Islam and religious pluralism remain central to the nation's identity and foreign policy. This commitment extends beyond national discourse, as exemplified by the 2023 visit of the Abu Dhabi-based Al-Muslimin Hukama Council, a global network of Islamic scholars, to study Indonesia's model of tolerant Islam (Secretariat of the Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022). Such diplomatic engagements further validate Indonesia's Moderate Islam narrative, creating opportunities for the country to establish itself as a global hub for Islamic discourse and interfaith dialogue.

The institutionalization of religious tolerance and pluralism in Indonesia is deeply embedded within the Pancasila ideology, which provides a unifying framework for managing religious diversity. Muslim Indonesians have historically emphasized the concept of *ukhuwah* (brotherhood) at three levels: *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (solidarity among Muslims), *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (national unity), and *ukhuwah insaniyah* (universal human fraternity). This communitarian approach promotes social cohesion and mitigates tensions at the grassroots level (Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022).

The Qur'an itself contains theological underpinnings that support religious pluralism, as reflected in Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13): *"O mankind, indeed We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one*

*another."* This verse underscores the Islamic imperative for mutual respect and coexistence, aligning with democratic values and pluralistic governance (Faqihuddin, 2021).

Religious diplomacy has emerged as a cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy, as articulated by Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi in the country's strategic priorities for 2019–2024. Within this framework, Indonesia employs Moderate Islam as a diplomatic tool for countering extremism and fostering interfaith dialogue. Constructivist literature highlights the significance of global norms, legal frameworks, and discursive practices in shaping foreign policy and identity construction (Iommi, 2022). Indonesia's promotion of Moderate Islam as a global agenda aligns with this theoretical perspective, demonstrating how identity formation influences international diplomacy.

Indonesia's diplomatic approach incorporates elements of multi-track diplomacy, which encompasses governmental engagement, civil society participation, economic collaboration, academic discourse, media representation, and religious diplomacy. This strategy leverages religion as an instrument for shaping global perceptions of Islam, countering radicalism, and promoting religious outreach through education and interfaith dialogue. By strengthening the various dimensions of multi-track diplomacy, Indonesia consolidates its narrative of Islamic moderation as a countermeasure against violent extremism, positioning itself as a global leader in religious tolerance and conflict resolution. This effort is further complemented by the promotion of Islamic economics and finance, reinforcing Indonesia's commitment to inclusive development and global stability (Secretariat of the Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022). Through coordinated efforts among government institutions, civil society, and religious organizations, Indonesia continues to shape its Moderate Islam diplomacy, demonstrating how religious identity can be strategically integrated into foreign policy to foster peace and international cooperation.

## VI. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Indonesia's construction of Moderate Islam emerges from the dynamic interplay between state and non-state actors, serving as a paradigmatic case of constructivist theory in international relations. This research identifies Indonesia's approach to Moderate Islam not as a fixed or preconceived entity but as an evolving identity shaped through historical, political, and sociological interactions. The involvement of institutions such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, alongside state apparatuses such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, illustrates how social norms and collective identity influence both domestic discourse and international diplomacy.

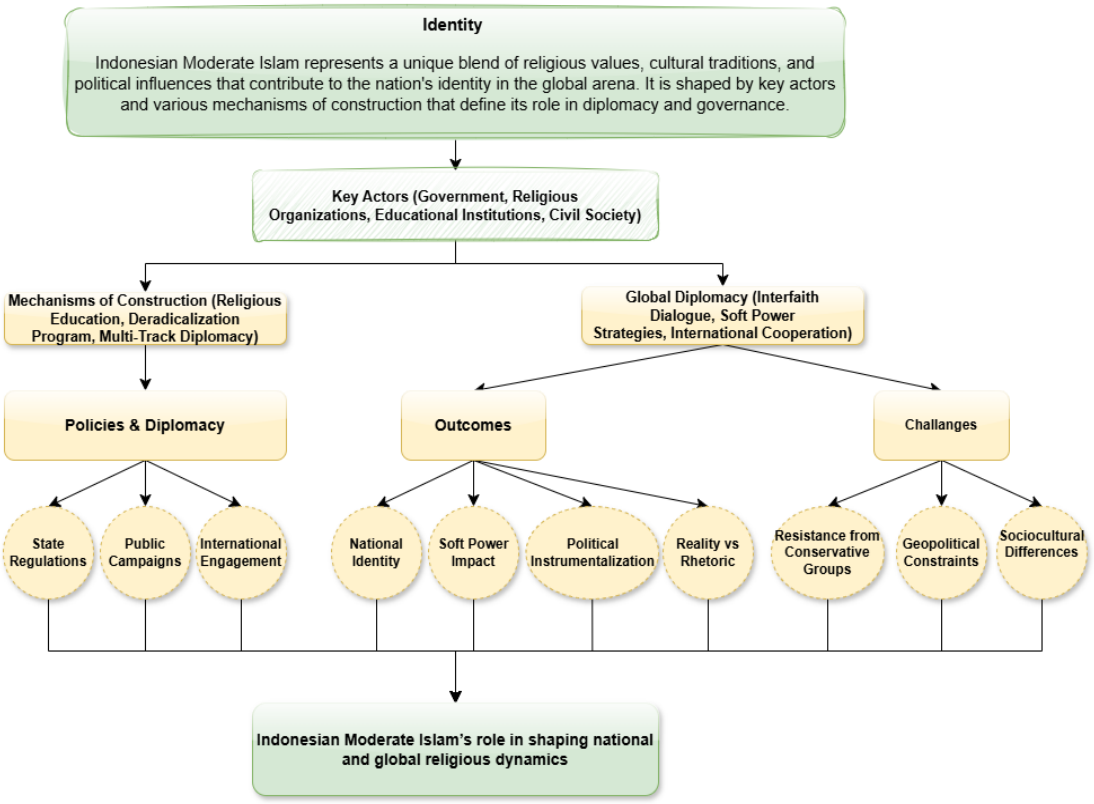



**Figure 2.** The Construction of Indonesian Moderate Islam: Identity, Diplomacy, and Challenges

This study highlights how Moderate Islam functions as a political instrument within Indonesia's foreign policy. The Indonesian government actively promotes Moderate Islam through multi-track diplomacy, positioning it as a counter-narrative to radicalism and extremism. This diplomatic branding serves to reinforce Indonesia's global image as a tolerant and democratic Muslim-majority nation. Constructivist theory posits that state behavior is not solely guided by material interests but also by ideational factors such as identity and norms. Through participation in international forums, collaborations with civil society organizations, and public-private partnerships with foreign institutions, Indonesia exemplifies the strategic instrumentalization of religion and cultural identity in both national and international affairs.

This study further underlines how external perceptions play a crucial role in reinforcing Indonesia's Moderate Islam identity. Constructivist theory argues that while international norms may be shaped by domestic actors, they are also influenced by external recognition and interaction with foreign states. The study finds that while Indonesia actively promotes the notion of Moderate Islam as a pillar of its foreign policy, global responses vary—some states support this narrative, while others remain skeptical. In this regard, Indonesia's hosting of

international forums such as the ASEAN Summit and the Bali Democracy Forum underscores how the discourse on Moderate Islam transcends national boundaries and remains subject to global contestation.

Despite its international recognition as a proponent of tolerance, peace, and democracy, Indonesia's Moderate Islam framework faces several challenges and criticisms. One major issue is the discrepancy between government rhetoric and the socio-political realities on the ground. Incidents of religious intolerance, discrimination against minority groups, and faith-based violence persist, suggesting that the values of religious moderation have not been universally implemented (Alvian & Ardhani, 2023). Critics argue that the Moderate Islam branding is sometimes employed as a political tool to suppress conservative Islamic opposition, leading to accusations that it is an elitist construct that fails to represent the diverse voices within Indonesia's Muslim communities. Concerns have been raised that, under the pretext of stability and social harmony, the narrative of Moderate Islam may be utilized to stifle progressive and critical Islamic thought.

Further criticisms highlight the contradictions between the principles of Moderate Islam and the realities of domestic governance and foreign diplomacy. While Indonesia champions democracy and freedom on the international stage, certain restrictive domestic policies raise questions about the credibility of its moderation narrative. Conservative Islamic groups have also rejected the Moderate Islam discourse, arguing that it serves as an instrument of Western influence that dilutes the authenticity of Islamic values instead of safeguarding them (Basyir, 2020).

The effectiveness of Indonesia's Moderate Islam diplomacy in countering radicalism and terrorism remains uncertain. Although Indonesia ranks 31st globally in the 2023 Global Terrorism Index (Rafli, 2024), the absence of significant terrorist threats raises questions about whether Moderate Islam, as a form of soft power, is sufficient to counter violent extremism. This prompts a deeper inquiry into whether Indonesia's international image truly reflects on-the-ground realities.

Another significant challenge is the tension between democratic principles and Islamic values in political practice. While Indonesia is often cited as an example of Islamic democracy, empirical developments in this area remain limited. The struggle to reconcile democratic governance with religious principles raises fundamental questions about the moderating effects of religion on political stability and governance (Hamdani, 2020). These tensions underscore the need for a more critical examination of Indonesia's Moderate Islam framework—beyond its positive narratives—to consider the contradictions and conflicts

embedded within it.

By integrating these findings, this study contributes to constructivist theory by providing empirical evidence on how religious identity functions as both a domestic construct and a diplomatic instrument. It challenges traditional realist and liberal perspectives by demonstrating that ideational factors such as religious moderation play a central role in shaping Indonesia's international engagement. This study advances constructivist discourse by illustrating how religious norms are disseminated, internalized, and adapted within global diplomatic frameworks. This reinforces the constructivist argument that international relations are continuously shaped by social interactions and shared understandings rather than merely by material power or strategic interests. In conclusion, while Indonesia's Moderate Islam diplomacy has enhanced its global standing as a model of religious tolerance, significant contradictions persist at the domestic level. Addressing these tensions will be crucial for ensuring that Indonesia's Moderate Islam narrative remains a credible and effective instrument of foreign policy in the years to come.

## VII. Conclusion

The establishment of Moderate Islam in Indonesia is deeply rooted in its intrinsic values, serving both as a reflection of the nation's internal identity and as an instrument of global representation. From the perspective of constructivist international relations theory, identity formation is contingent upon shared knowledge and the way actors interpret and interact with their sociopolitical environment. In this regard, Indonesia's endorsement of Moderate Islam is positioned as a commitment to tolerance, peace, and democratic governance, while simultaneously countering violence, radicalism, and extremism. Pancasila, as the ideological foundation of the Indonesian state, reinforces the intersection between Islamic principles and the nation's pluralistic identity.

The construction of Moderate Islam in Indonesia is facilitated by both state and non-state actors, with Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) playing pivotal roles as civil society organizations. These institutions have led numerous national and international initiatives aimed at institutionalizing Moderate Islam within Indonesia's political and social fabric. On the international stage, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has actively sought to establish Indonesia's legitimacy as a proponent of Islamic moderation by engaging in global forums and intergovernmental organizations that promote religious tolerance. This study highlights the role of religious scholars, policymakers, and civil society leaders in shaping the diffusion of Moderate Islam as a central component of Indonesia's national identity. By utilizing a multi-track diplomacy approach, Indonesia strategically promotes Moderate Islam as a tool for foreign policy, leveraging its soft power to position itself as a bridge between the Islamic world and the West.

## VIII. Suggestion

Based on these findings, several key recommendations emerge. First, Indonesia should further institutionalize Moderate Islam as a diplomatic instrument by expanding its multi-track diplomacy framework. This requires enhanced coordination between state institutions, civil society organizations, religious leaders, and academic institutions to solidify Indonesia's global influence as a model of tolerant and democratic Islam. Second, addressing the existing gap between the narrative of Moderate Islam and social realities is imperative. Government policies must actively combat intolerance and discrimination at the domestic level through stronger legal frameworks, inclusive education, and grassroots initiatives. This will ensure that Moderate Islam is not merely a rhetorical tool for diplomacy but a lived reality within Indonesian society.Third, recognizing the critiques surrounding the instrumentalization of Moderate Islam, this study underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between inclusivity, democratic principles, and human rights. The government must ensure that Moderate Islam remains an open and accommodating framework rather than a political tool used to suppress ideological opposition. Lastly, research on Moderate Islam should extend beyond political discourse to encompass economic development, education, and global comparative studies. Investigating its role in shaping national economies, interfaith dialogues, and geopolitical dynamics will further reinforce its strategic significance at both national and international levels. Collectively, these efforts will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Moderate Islam as a dynamic and evolving construct within global political discourse, enhancing Indonesia's position as a leading advocate of religious moderation on the world stage.

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