Tolerant Movement from Below: Grassroot Agency for Religious Moderation in Indonesian Socio-Political Contexts

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Abstract: The intolerance movement is a challenge amidst the diversity of religions and ethnicities. Civil movements have a significant role in countering intolerance initiatives, and narratives, such as discrimination against minorities, church building permit, and prohibition of religious activities in public spaces. This article examines the role of civil actions in transforming the values of religious tolerance and moderation values in social movements by taking Persaudaraan Lintas Agama (Pelita) as a case study. Pelita is a grassroots agency in Semarang, Central Java, consolidating communities of different religions and ethnicities to dialogue, collaborate for inter-religious tolerance, and advocate for discriminated groups. This study explores the grassroots agency’s role in managing societal differences and conflicts. Data is collected from the literature, interviews, observations, and written documents. This study reveals that grassroots movements are essential for building tolerance and guarding against terror threats, intimidation, and propaganda by attacking groups. The civic community promoted fraternity, volunteerism, and advocacy. Pelita promotes discriminated groups and has several strategies and values through dialogue, the development of co-existence activities, and advocacy. Their vision allows freedom to practice one’s religion or belief openly in public. Pancasila principles, cultural values, and communal tolerance mobilize people and religious convictions to uphold tolerance.

Keywords: Community, tolerance, moderate Islam, religious moderation

Abstrak: Gerakan intoleransi menjadi tantangan di tengah keberagaman agama dan suku. Gerakan sipil mempunyai peran penting dalam melawan inisiatif dan narasi intoleransi, seperti diskriminasi terhadap kelompok minoritas, izin mendirikan gereja, dan larangan kegiatan keagamaan di ruang publik. Artikel ini mengkaji...
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INTRODUCTION

Intolerance is a significant challenge in efforts to build religious moderation in Indonesia. Cherian George explains several factors that make intolerance develop in Indonesia (George, 2016a). First is sectarian conflict; there is competition between local actors from various communities and identity political groups to gain power at the provincial and district levels. Second, the threat of terrorism from Jihadist groups. Third, the increase in the culture of hatred and violence against minority groups, such as the inhibition of permits for church construction and discrimination of the Ahmadiyya and Shia groups. Sidney Jones emphasized that radical groups initiated one of the challenges of intolerance in Indonesia (Jones, 2013).

Fourth, the massive promotion of exclusive or puritan Islam. Nevertheless, George stated that the dominant Javanese Muslims countered the Puritan Islam movement, prioritizing integrating Islam with tradition (George, 2016). Fifth, the strengthening of Islamic politics since the formulation of the Jakarta Charter until now. Contest and debate about national identity, where the ideology of Pancasila confronts the demands of Islamist groups for applying religious identity and regulations based on Islamic Sharia.

Sixth is groups that spread hatred, such as the Islamic Defenders Forum (FPI). FPI transformed from a group trained to ward off protesters against the government into a reactionary Muslim group. In addition, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia is a group that is not directly involved in acts of violence but spreads intolerant views that encourage extremist groups and justify discrimination (George, 2016).

Robert Pringle explains that Indonesia has two stereotypes: Indonesian Islam is a moderate reflected peaceful country, and Indonesia is a soft state with the risk of succumbing to extremism and committing violence against minorities (Pringle,
Pringle’s statement asserts that moderate Islam represents the democratic practice in Indonesia to express religious freedom. Values, traditions, and constitutions are the main pillars of this moderation. However, this moderate community has contested intolerant movements and understandings that can disrupt religious harmony and freedom. This hypothesis is also interesting to study as a binary opposition between a tolerant Indonesian Muslim or an intolerant politicized one depending on the dichotomy between good Muslims and bad Muslims (Mamdani, 2002).

Previous studies on tolerant and religious moderation discussed the historical review of tolerance in Indonesia (Ricklefs, 1981; Yasi et al., 2019) religious pluralism (Basya, 2011) and interfaith dialogue (Rahmah & Muhyi, 2021; Isnavati et al., 2020; Hadi Kusuma & Susilo, 2020) government policies and tolerance (Mujiburrahman, 2008; Menchik, 2016) tolerance in education (Wijaya Mulya & Aditomo, 2019; Huda et al., 2021; Adijaya, 2020) the role of civil society organizations (Ahmad, 2019; Darojat & Chair, 2019) and media and tolerance (Akmaliah, 2020; Rohman, 2020).

Meanwhile, studies on the Grassroot Agency building Religious Moderation in Indonesia are still limited. This article explores the research gap on the role of the civil movement in strengthening religious tolerance and moderation. This study will discuss Pelita’s role in countering intolerance and promoting tolerance by coordinating with interfaith movements and organizations.

This article explores the importance of grassroots agency in promoting religious moderation in the complex socio-political context of Indonesia. Through investigation of the nation’s religious history and contemporary environment, this study carves the significant role that ordinary citizens and community-based initiatives play in fostering religious tolerance. This article examines successful grassroots movements and the obstacles they encounter in their endeavours, drawing on case studies and illustrative examples. Furthermore, the article evaluates the impact of governmental policies. It delineates crucial determinants of success for these endeavors, particularly emphasising the prospective future developments of religious moderation in Indonesia. In conclusion, there is a need for ongoing assistance and endeavors to enhance the influence of grassroots movements in attaining a society characterized by tolerance and inclusivity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study explores the grassroots agency’s role in managing societal differences and conflicts. Data is collected from the literature, interviews, observations, and written documents. This study reveals that grassroots movements are essential for building tolerance and guarding against terror threats, intimidation, and propaganda by attacking groups. The civic community promoted fraternity, volunteerism, and advocacy.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Top-down vis a vis Bottom-up model

Tolerant and religious moderation is the government’s strategy. It is to achieve spiritual harmony through practicing religious values and accepting differences to realize national unity (Widodo, 2020). Tungkagi explains that religious moderation is a cultural strategy, not a security approach (Tungkagi, 2022). Therefore, the
Ministry of Religious Affairs developed different techniques. For example, it is enhancing the ability of educators, readers, and the media to guarantee adherence to the Constitution’s protection of the right to freedom of religion and restoring religion to its original function as a source of spirituality and morals.

However, the role of the civil movement in building religious moderation has made a significant contribution. Luc Reychler suggests that managing religious differences requires several conditions (Reychler & Langer, 2020). First, good and harmonious communication makes it possible to discuss, explain, and correct the rumors or information that spreads and can cause conflict between social groups. The second factor is the work done by institutions that deal with issues, whether formal, like courts, or informal, like traditional and religious institutions, communities, and civil movements. Thirdly, peace advocates have power, resources, and workable plans to stop pro-conflict advocates from organizing large-scale demonstrations. The fourth factor is the sociopolitical framework that promotes the establishment of justice in society. Fifth, a fair sociopolitical system ensures social integration’s survival. It shows us that the involvement of civil society movements has contributed to building tolerance and peace. It is a bottom-up model; the community promotes tolerance values from their traditions to create social harmony, inspiring the government to formulate a tolerance policy.

The role of the civil society movement in religious tolerance is significant for several reasons. First, the typology of Indonesian society is a communal society, so the role of religious and traditional leaders is substantial in mobilizing and moving people from conflict to peace. Second, values, traditions, and cultural systems drive society to maintain brotherhood based on primordial values. Third, the reconciliation, mediation, and advocacy strategies carried out by civil society are more readily accepted by the warring parties because they can communicate effectively in building social justice.

On conflict issues, two approaches are usually taken. First the political approach uses the tools of the state and secondly the social approach that involves the bottom of society (grassroots). The pattern of conflict resolution using a political approach involving state power does not always go smoothly. This can be proven by the conflict that has occurred in Ambon. This conflict dragged on for quite a long time from 1999 to 2002 (Wibisono, n.d.). The government prioritized repressive and militarized actions that ultimately only caused fear and resistance reactions compared to the presence of consciousness. This conflict resolution model is the top-down model, from the government as the party at the top to the community as the party below. In the case of Ambon, this approach instead resulted in a slow resolution of the conflict (Qurtuby, 2012).

In contrast to the top-down model, a bottom-up model starts from society as a bottom group. This model was also pursued when the Ambon conflict stemmed from a religious conflict between the two major religions, Islam and Christianity. Efforts to resolve this conflict are carried out by holding debates in a fair and solutive open space. Also, to avoid contradictions that cause a tug-of-war between the political interests of policymakers and the demands of law enforcement from civil society. The presence of community leaders such as religious leaders as a representation of the role and movement of the community in supporting law enforcement amid the turmoil of existing religious conflicts. These figures received a
mandate from grassroots and civil society to accommodate community demands which would later be conveyed to the government to prioritize law enforcement in resolving religious conflicts in Ambon. This strict law enforcement is intended to ensure that the main actors, conspirators, and masterminds behind the Ambon-Maluku conflict that occurred are then taken decisive action as a handling and effort to stop the conflict (Tidore, 2020).

In the end, the Ambon-Maluku religious conflict can be resolved by involving many parties, especially from among the community. These parties include journalists, students, religious leaders, lawyers, intellectuals, and local traditional figures. The large amount of support that exists encourages the formation of movements, groups, and social networks that are moderate or supportive of the concept that is now more popularly known as wasatiyya both in religious, social, political, to national and state life. This confirms the large role of community groups from below as agents of moderation by taking as an example the case of conflict that occurred in Ambon more than two decades ago (Tidore, 2020).

The grassroots movement’s role has been evident since the beginning of Indonesia’s identity formation as a newly independent country. Indonesian national identity is shaped through socio-political contestation which started with the establishment of Japan’s Investigative Agency for Independence Efforts -Badan Penyelidik Usaha Usaha Persiapan Kemerdekaan (BPUPKI) on April 9, 1945 (Wahab, 2019). After a proposal from representatives of Islamic groups about making Islam the basis of the Indonesian state was rejected, a committee of nine was formed on June 1, 1945, to complete discussions and reach an agreement on National principles. The Committee of Nine produced a draft of the preamble to the State’s fundamental law, named the ‘Jakarta Charter’ (Piagam Jakarta).

On August 18, 1945, Soekarno and Hatta, president and vice president of Indonesia, held an informal meeting with some Islamic figures, including Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, Wahid Hasyim, and Teuku Mohammad Hasan. The meeting discussed the objections of East Indonesia figures regarding the contents of the Jakarta Charter and their request to remove the phrase ‘the obligation to carry out Islamic law for its adherents.’ After much consideration, the proposals from Eastern Indonesian figures, especially for the sake of the integrity of the Indonesian nation, were fulfilled, and the seven words were removed from the Jakarta Charter (Zulfikri, 2021). This event shows that grassroots movements or bottom-up model of tolerance is very influential and effective in tackling the issues of religious tolerance in Indonesia; even recommendations from minority groups influence state policy.

Unlike stakeholders from the top, community groups from below witness firsthand what occurs in society daily. Although limited to a narrow range, it shows a significant role in effort diversity and manages it as a capital for peacebuilding and conflict reconciliation. Interfaith Brotherhood (Pelita) as one of the agents from the grassroots level has pointed out that its existence has a significant influence on the realization of religious harmony in Semarang. Pelita commits to creating inter-religious harmony using a comprehensive and contextual approach by putting forward the issue of tolerance between religious communities. Pelita has a huge impact and potentially can disseminate its values in Semarang and a wider range such as national scale (Taufiq et al., 2022).
Background of PELITA

Persaudaraan Lintas Agama (abbreviated Pelita) seeks to dialogue about tolerance and religious moderation values even in pressure from conservative groups. We can see this phenomenon from what is experienced by interfaith groups who carry out interfaith activities that intolerant groups reject. In 2016, interfaith groups planned to hold an iftar together in Ungaran, the capital of the Semarang regency. The iftar activity aims to build harmony and brotherhood in Indonesia. Iftar at the Church and Presbytery of Christ Raja Ungaran, scheduled for Thursday, June 16, 2016, at 16.00-17.45 WIB with guests for the Regional Government, Forkomindo, local community leaders, the poor: motorcycle taxi drivers, factory workers, street children, orphanages and Street sweeper. The activity has received the Regent’s permission and coordinated with relevant stakeholders, including security.

The Islamic Defenders Front, Hizbut Tahir, Mualaf Center, and some groups at Semarang rejected the iftar activity. Their refusal was because the program to break the fast together in the churchyard sparked unrest and undermined the conduciveness, harmony, and tolerance that had been good so far. They believe that this activity is considered destructive and violates the Islamic creed. After conducting discussions and mediation, they agreed on several things. First, they still welcome Mrs. Shinta Nuriyah on visits to the Pudak Payung Catholic Church yard and speak to the audience there. Second, iftar was held at the Pudak Payung Village Hall (Aloysius Budi, 2016).

After rejecting the interfaith joint iftar, interfaith religious leaders gathered to establish an interreligious movement, Persaudaraan Lintas Agama (Pelita), in response to Semarang’s intolerance movement. Therefore, the establishment of Pelita has several significances. First, Pelita is a civil movement formed and initiated collaboratively to fight symbolic violence, repression, and coercion for security and religion. Second, countermovement against an intolerant group based on civil movements, not formed by the government. Third, the consolidation of civil agency to strengthen awareness of movement-based tolerance so as not to be intimidated by intolerant movements. Fourth, program initiation and dissemination of ideas of religious tolerance and moderation to the community, especially youth, regarding the importance of building understanding, respect, and acceptance of differences in religion and identity. Fifth, advocacy for vulnerable and discriminated groups.

Religious Moderation: Efforts from The Grass Root Movement

Socio-political conditions at the national level affect regional dynamics, including city and rural areas. There are several triggers—first, access to public information on national socio-political issues through news, radio, and social media. People consume national news and contextualize it in their area. They feel part of the problem. Geographical boundaries do not become a barrier but become a reinforcement. Second, primordial values and identities mobilize them to react and respond with social action.

Jeremy Menchik says that tolerance in contemporary Indonesia is a practice of communal tolerance. Civil organizations can accommodate diverse religious beliefs and understanding of social and political practices. This model differs from other types of tolerance, such as religious tolerance, secular-liberal tolerance, and
pragmatic tolerance. Cyrus Masroori defines religious tolerance—by Jalāl al-Dīn Balkhī (1207-1273)—as emphasizing theological-spiritual arguments; God created humans in various ways, including Muslims and non-Muslims (Masroori, 2010). Muhammad and many prophets convey their revelations and teachings to different people. Humans have a limited understanding of universal truth and faith. Therefore, tolerance is needed, so there is no coercion on the universal truth and faith because diversity is God’s creation. In addition, John Locke has a secular-liberal concept of tolerance, separating private beliefs from public actions. This tolerance delimitates the State’s authority over freedom, land, health, and other material matters. State confesses all personal religious beliefs. Meanwhile, Menchik says communal tolerance is distinctive from pragmatic tolerance. It is a willingness to accept differences and unpleasant things to create stability (Menchik, 2016).

Communal tolerance manifested in several fields. Such as education, worship, speech, representation of religious people, and social recognition. This paper seeks to implement worship, freedom of speech, and social recognition. In worship, the establishment of prayer place—like mosque and church—for a minority group in the majority religious community. In the freedom of expression and speech, minority communities can express their opinions through discussions, seminars, and demonstrations. At the same time, recognition allows minority groups to get social recognition as citizens without discrimination and rejection (Menchik, 2016).

Several civil movements, such as Nahdatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and Pelita, fight for tolerance through the community. Menchik says that NU and Muhammadiyah want religious accommodation in matters of belief subject to a different set of criteria than issues of social relations (Menchik, 2016). This belief stems from a significant distinction in classical fiqh and modernist understandings of Islamic law between matters of social relations (mu‘āmalāt), faith (aqīdah), and worship (ibādah). Regarding State and worship, NU and Muhammadiyah feel that each community must regulate its internal relations, while the government highly regulates the external ones. The organization of this community’s religious life is one of the characteristics of their vision of communal tolerance.

Pelita is a civil movement that actively voices tolerance between religious communities and advocates minority groups, established in 2016. It is a communication for interfaith communities to maintain co-existence and build peace in Semarang. Semarang, a multi-ethnic and religious city, has experience managing community-based conflicts. The community involvement in peacebuilding and resolving conflicts made Semarang receive the Harmoni Awards in 2020 for successfully maintaining religious harmony. This achievement came from the contributions of the government, religious leaders, and communities, including Pelita, the Interfaith Brotherhood.

Several values form the basis of the Pelita program. These values are understood, internalized, and implemented in their programs. First, brotherhood, building the spirit of interfaith brotherhood. There is a common perspective; religion is the reason for someone to be intolerant, even though religion always teaches to build brotherhood even though they have different religions and beliefs. Pelita has the experience that made her feel the need to create a space for an interfaith meeting based on brotherhood.
Pelita was originally due to an *ifār* event planned to be held at the Ungaran Catholic church but was rejected. Participants who attended the event were religious leaders. So, we create this community. The first name is Persaudaraan Lintas Umat (the Brotherhood of Religious Believers). There is a suggestion: the people are identical, with only a few religious adherents. Then, we changed it to the Interfaith Brotherhood so that followers of other religions, including other faiths, can feel free to join. Then formed until now’ (Setyawan Budi, personal communication, Oktober 2021).

Discriminatory experiences are the starting point for the idea of forming a community. Suppose a discriminatory experience is interpreted as a bad experience that often triggers social conflict. For Pelita, the biased experience is interpreted as a moment to ground the principle of tolerance to the community. Pelita disseminates the principles of tolerance to minimize future forms of discrimination. The activity conveys religious co-existence and advocates for discriminated groups.

The value of brotherhood emphasizes that the primary purpose of religion is to teach the importance of knitting brotherhood. Brotherhood is evidence of the maturity of faith, not vice versa; religion does not destroy brotherhood. Religious maturity is measured by faith that provides benefits, safety, and peace.

Second, volunteers are an agent of tolerance who works collaboratively and voluntarily to build peacebuilding communities through education, culture, and advocacy.

Pelita’s ideology is living together in different religions and beliefs. So, the principle of Pelita management is based on kinship to meet and maintain mutual relations between religious communities. Volunteers join because of the calling of the heart. Then some volunteers who might be considered members are still active. But even though we never open recruitment, we are grateful because until now, the volunteers are full every time there is an event’.

Third, equality, defending discriminated and marginalized communities. The participants gave stressing points to advocacy in the context of religious practice and social issues.

‘The other activity is advocacy. We have assisted the community several times with marginalized groups who have been discriminated against, especially those who have experienced religious discrimination’ (Setyawan Budi, personal communication, Oktober 2021).

Pelita is a diversity-responsive community. Programs to disseminate the spirit of tolerance and assistance to marginalized and discriminated groups. The program includes (1) consolidation among volunteers, (2) a peacebuilding program, and (3) advocacy and assistance.

First, consolidation between volunteers periodically: weekly, monthly, and annually, to strengthen friendship and emotional closeness. There are several regular programs: Inter-Ummah Forum (*Forum Antar Umat*), a public dialogue of religions and beliefs representatives to convey insights on the current contexts from theological or social aspects.

‘The weekly routine program is the Inter-Ummah Forum. This program is a collaboration between Pelita and JFM radio (102.8) with interactive
discussions through radio broadcasts every Thursday from 10.00 to 11.00 WIB. Listeners can submit questions to the Speakers. The Speakers are our volunteers, scheduled from each religion and belief. So all volunteers can express and share their experiences. They will exchange insights, know, understand, and tolerate each other. This program does not discuss religion and belief notions, but also discusses social issues’ (Setyawan Budi, personal communication, Oktober 2021).

Second, a peacebuilding program through a peace camp (Pondok Damai). It is an interfaith gathering program attended by teenagers from various religions, beliefs, and ethnicities. It has been held every year since 2018. The goal is to internalize tolerance in the younger generation, socialize co-existence, and practice a tolerance model. Participants visited and lived several times in different places of worship (mosque, church, monastery, temple) and sharing of religious experiences from some religious backgrounds, beliefs, and ethnicities.

‘The peace camp participants are mostly young people for three days. The camp location is in the courtyard of the place of worship. Participants have new friends and networks that strengthen the tolerance community in Indonesia. The ultimate materials are sharing religious experiences. For example, why he is Muslim, he will tell about sharing experiences interacting with different faith believers, both good and bad experiences. On the third day, participants will visit places of worship of religions for interfaith dialogue. Participants are limited to 30 participants accepted through selection. The selection process considers representations from religious, belief, and ethnic backgrounds so that the participants are diverse and not dominated by certain religions, beliefs, and ethnicities’ (Setyawan Budi, personal communication, Oktober 2021).

In addition, Pelita held discussions and communications with the moderation movement network, such as Nahdhatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, Elsa, Gusdurian, Universities, and leaders from across religions. Pelita is also active in the dialogue with government elements; Mayor, Regional People’s Representative Council (DPRD), Police, etc. This communication helps Pelita in advocacy work. Because Pelita is an individual-based organization, not an institutional representation, making it is easier for coordination and advocacy.

Third, advocacy, Pelita advocated for discrimination against marginalized minorities and discriminated groups. Such as supporting the rejection of the construction of the Indonesian Baptist Church (GBI) Tlogosari, Semarang.

‘We have assisted in cases of refusal to establish a church in Telogosari. The rather long assistance was assistance to the Shia group who experienced discrimination in Semarang from 2015 to 2019. They have also assisted the community in Tambakrejo evictions. Our volunteer professional backgrounds are diverse: teachers, lecturers, Kyai, religious leaders, lawyers, and prosecutors. The assistance is not always money or funds; skilled personnel and networks are also important’ (Setyawan Budi, personal communication, Oktober 2021).

There are three patterns of Pelita’s social actions in maintaining tolerance. First, harmonious communication through discussion and clarification between social groups. Through regular discussions with volunteers and interfaith leaders,
and Pondok Damai. Second, Pelita works as a problem-solving agency at the informal level and understands formal institutions. Third, religious leaders involved in Pelita influence preventing mass mobilization by pro-conflict movements.

CONCLUSION

Religious moderation and tolerance in Indonesia have several features. The uniqueness is motivated by the diversity of ethnicity and religiosity. In addition, how the community and civic community manage tolerance also has a distinction, prioritising local wisdom to resolve socio-religious conflicts. Several things encourage the creation of tolerance in Indonesia. First, the national philosophy in Indonesia is Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika. The national philosophy and values become the constitutional foundation of how citizens understand differences and struggle with the dynamics of identity, interpretation, and interests.

Second, primordial ties, cultural and relational relations due to the similarity of religion, region, tradition, culture, and understanding strengthen social ties. This primordial bond is an aspect of enhancing the establishment of religious moderation and tolerance. The participation of interfaith communities in one religious ceremony is a plural phenomenon based on primordial ties such as family kinship and neighborhood associations.

Third, values and teachings about harmony. These values are born from religious traditions, culture, and society. Teachings such as tepo seliro (respect) and sambatan or gotongroyong (cooperation) are cultural teachings and values that maintain societal tolerance.

Fourth, communal tolerance prioritizes common interests compared to individual interests. There are two impacts of this tolerance model; first, a positive impact, namely communal tolerance, guarantees the creation of religious harmony that leaders of religious organizations manage. The negative effect is that this tolerance triggers a friction between the majority and the minority.

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