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Developing Inter-faith Tolerance in Indonesia: A Literature Study on Challenges and Supporting Factors

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Abstract
Indonesia, as a multicultural country with religious diversity, considers tolerance essential for maintaining social harmony. This literature study aims to analyze the phenomenon of religious intolerance in Indonesia, identify its root causes, and examine the challenges and key factors that support efforts to build religious tolerance. Based on a literature synthesis, it was concluded that despite legal guaranties, intolerance is still prevalent, driven by exclusivist views, fanaticism, a lack of inclusive religious understanding, the role of social media, and religious education curricula that are not yet comprehensive. Several factors supporting efforts to build tolerance include the role of education, the role of community, and the role of family.
Keywords: Inter-faith, Tolerance, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a multicultural country with religious diversity, making building tolerance essential for maintaining social harmony. The word tolerance comes from Latin, specifically *tolerantia* (noun) or *tolerare* (verb) [Igboin, 2016]. Literally, *tolerare* means “to endure, to permit, to allow, or to bear” [Igboin, 2016]. In a historical and social context, the meaning of tolerance is the ability to endure something that is disliked or disapproved of [Schmidt-Leukel, 2002]. In the context of interreligious and social relations, the meaning of tolerance has evolved, but its core definition remains rooted in its etymology. The classic definition of tolerance is the absence of objection. So, tolerance is generally defined as allowing others to practice their religious beliefs without hindrance [Igboin, 2016; Widayati & Maulidiyah, 2018]. This definition has a fundamental weakness, according to experts, because tolerance is seen as the absence of objection rather than genuine approval of others' beliefs [Igboin, 2016]. Tolerance still implies a restrained dislike of the beliefs being tolerated [Schmidt-Leukel, 2002]. This is related to the two approaches to the perception of tolerance described by Igboin (2016), namely negative tolerance and positive tolerance. Negative tolerance means understanding the religious beliefs and practices of others without sharing or accepting them. In positive tolerance, in addition to understanding, there is also "accepting them as equally valid approaches to life." However, this concept of validity is difficult to apply to conflicting and absolute religious doctrines, such as Christian and Moslem views on Jesus Christ (Igboin, 2016).

The second criticism relates to the division of power. Tolerance implicitly creates a division between the strong and the less strong, where the strong party "allows" the other, thus requiring a step forward toward true or frank dialog (Igbon, 2016). This indicates that tolerance is practiced as a socio-political necessity, not due to theological acceptance [Igboin, 2016; Schmidt-Leukel, 2002]. To create constructive interreligious relationships, the meaning of tolerance must move toward a deeper concept, namely genuine appreciation [Schmidt-Leukel, 2002]. True appreciation is a perspective where one not only "refrains" from interfering, but values and even praises the Divine presence or the values of truth reflected in other religious traditions. This is based on the perspective of religious pluralism [Schmidt-Leukel, 2002]. Next,

functionally, tolerance becomes a key value in multicultural societies to create social harmony and avoid intolerance [Syarah, 2025; Fitria & Tanggok, 2020]. In reality, despite legal instruments like the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Articles 2 and 18) guaranteeing freedom of religion and freedom to change religion, the practice of tolerance in Indonesia remains problematic. Intolerance arises when the boundaries of tolerance are crossed, shifting from mere disagreement to active rejection, discrimination, and violence [Evendi, Suwito, & Mujito, 2022]. Theologically, intolerance is rooted in the view of exclusivism, which is the belief that only one's own religion holds absolute truth claims and is the sole channel of salvation [Galbraith, Carlile, & White, 2020]. As a result, other religions are considered wrong or invalid, and therefore must be converted or discriminated against [Galbraith, Carlile, & White, 2020]. This exclusivism is related to the view of tolerance as a disgrace/degradation or tolerance as deprivation (van der Walt, 2014), meaning tolerance is seen as a sign of weakening, That is, tolerance is seen as a sign of weakening beliefs and moral principles. Individuals with this view tend to reject tolerance because they see it as relativism and disloyalty to absolute truth. This exclusivism is the opposite of the view of total tolerance, which is the belief that all religions and worldviews are equally true, or complete relativism (van der Walt, 2014). The third view is tolerance as a technical necessity.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the phenomenon of intolerance, there is a contradiction. One study showed this contradictory attitude among highly educated Moslems. Moslem students, as an educated group, demonstrate acceptance of religious pluralism as God's will. However, at the same time, they tend to be intolerant of issues that touch on theological aspects (truth claims) and communal practices (such as establishing places of worship and judging the holy books of other religions). This attitude indicates that formal knowledge gained from higher education has not yet fully controlled behavior, and individual beliefs are still dominated by exclusive doctrines (Suntana & Tresnawaty, 2022). In other words, although Indonesian society generally accepts pluralism, there is a tendency to be exclusive and negate others (Djamil, 2023). The view of exclusivism believes that only one's own religion holds absolute truth claims and is the sole channel of salvation. As a result, other religions are considered wrong or invalid, and therefore must be converted or discriminated against [Galbraith, Carlile, & White, 2020]. Exclusive thinking is evident in religious expressions, both individual and collective, which often lead to exclusive attitudes and a culture that struggles to accept others with different beliefs (Djamil, 2023).

Beside exclusivism, intolerance is rooted in a collective mindset that latently considers non-Moslems to have an inferior status in the social hierarchy. This mindset manifests in discriminatory behavior, including social neglect, which is the reluctance to interact with or give charity/alms to non-Moslems, and even indifference to their suffering (Khan & Rao, n.d.). Furthermore, educational institutions, which should be bastions of tolerance, have instead become vulnerable points for the spread of radical narratives. Schools and universities are targeted due to the lack of oversight of religious activities and the misuse of social media by students to spread extremist ideas (Aprilianto et al., 2025). This indicates that the internalization of tolerance values thru the curriculum has not been effective (Muhaemin et al., 2023). Another factor is fanaticism and truth claims. Religious fanaticism is the belief that one's views or teachings are the most correct, which fuels competition over which perspective is "greater" (Kurniawan et al., 2022; Putrawan et al., 2022). The next factor is the difference in levels of religious understanding. Ordinary people tend to understand religion thru symbols and emotions without deep rational analysis, making them more susceptible to influence by fanatical groups (Kurniawan et al., 2022). Social media also plays a role in strengthening

intolerance between religious communities. Technological advancements have made religious information more accessible, but they have also become a means for fanatical groups, who only recognize the truth of their own views, to spread hatred and insults (Kurniawan et al., 2022). From an educational perspective, the religious education curriculum related to the content of religious moderation, for example, in Islamic religious education textbooks, is not fully comprehensive or adequately integrated with the four indicators of moderation, which is exacerbated by insufficient learning time allocation (Muhaemin et al., 2023).

Challenges in Building Tolerance. Despite ongoing efforts to build tolerance, there are several structural and social challenges hindering its sustainability. The first challenge is the threat of identity politics and populist Islam. The wave of intolerance fueled by populist Islam exploiting identity politics (such as the 212 Action) has created divisions and threatened the sustainability of interfaith dialog, promoting the strengthening of exclusive attitudes (Netanyahu & Susanto, n.d.). The second challenge is legal and policy issues. Technical regulations such as Joint Ministerial Regulation (PBM) Number 9 and 8 of 2006 (regarding the Establishment of Places of Worship) often complicate matters for minority groups, thus sparking tensions and being considered one of the challenges in the legal aspect (Hutabarat, 2023). The third challenge is the tendency to avoid discussing sensitive theological issues. Interaction is limited to normal things, which actually fosters suspicion rather than deep understanding (Putrawan et al., 2022). The fourth challenge is the ineffectiveness of the conventional approach. Security approaches only temporarily halt conflict, while dialog often only occurs among the elite, failing to address grassroots issues (Djamil, n.d.).

Factors Supporting Interreligious Tolerance. Various studies highlight several key factors that are effective in promoting tolerance. The first factor is religious moderation and education. Within the framework of religious moderation in Indonesia, tolerance is positioned as one of the main pillars that must be accompanied by national commitment, anti-violence, and accommodation of local culture [Mulyanti & Muhajarah, 2025]. This directs the meaning of tolerance toward a concrete and supportive attitude of appreciating differences, rather than simply allowing them [Mulyanti & Muhajarah, 2025]. Religious moderation is considered a bridge to peace (Aprilianto et al., 2025; Mulyanti & Muhajarah, 2025). Effective implementation must focus on four indicators: national commitment, which is loyalty to Pancasila and the Unitary Republic of Indonesia; tolerance, which is respecting and accepting differences; anti-violence, which is rejecting all forms of violence in the name of religion; and accommodation of local culture, which is respecting local wisdom.

The Indonesian government, thru the Ministry of Religious Affairs, is promoting Religious Moderation as a strategy to combat extremism and radicalism [Mulyanti & Muhajarah, 2025]. Religious moderation serves as a bridge offering balance in religious practice and understanding, with four main indicators: National Commitment, Tolerance, Anti-Violence, and Accommodation of Local Culture [Mulyanti & Muhajarah, 2025]. Theologically, there is a need to move beyond the concept of tolerance (as 'dislike held in check') toward genuine appreciation [Schmidt-Leukel, 2002]. This appreciation is based on a view of religious pluralism that sees other religious traditions as legitimate paths to the same Transcendent Reality, thus there is no theological reason to merely tolerate them [Schmidt-Leukel, 2002]. The second factor is learning patterns and practical wisdom. The formation of tolerant attitudes requires a learning pattern that goes beyond the cognitive aspect alone (Junaedi et al., 2023). Socio-emotional aspects (internalization of values) and practical-empirical aspects (real-world application) are more effective in shaping tolerant feelings and behaviors. This aligns with the concept of practical wisdom, which is the applied ability to integrate knowledge with religious awareness in order to act ethically and rationally amidst diversity (Huda et al., 2020). Schools

are a strategic place to build understanding and respect for diverse beliefs [Susari, Upiyani, & Marzuki, 2024]. Therefore, curriculum integration is necessary. The Islamic Religious Education curriculum needs to be revamped to explicitly integrate values of tolerance and religious literacy, including introducing the basic tenets of other recognized religions [Susari, Upiyani, & Marzuki, 2024]. In addition, the use of active, creative, and humanistic teaching methods (such as cooperative learning, discussions, and case studies) is very effective in training students to make tolerant decisions and understand differences [Susari, Upiyani, & Marzuki, 2024]. Finally, teacher role modeling is very important. Religious teachers and teachers of other subjects must be role models in demonstrating moderate and inclusive attitudes [Susari, Upiyani, & Marzuki, 2024].

The third factor is interreligious dialog. Interreligious dialog is an important means of overcoming prejudice caused by ignorance, building mutual understanding, and finding common ground in universal values (Seran, 2025). Revitalizing Interreligious Dialog: Dialog must move beyond the elite level and serve as a tool to overcome ignorance and negative prejudice (Seran, 2025). The goal is to build mutual respect and create a safe communal space for openly sharing beliefs. In addition, socialization thru da'wah focused on economic harmonization (such as cooperatives involving all religions, which will create social equality and mutual trust), social harmonization (encouraging non-religious interaction), and cultural harmonization (respecting local traditions and preventing dogmatism) has proven effective in creating functional harmony at the grassroots level (Nurcholis et al., 2021). The fourth factor is the role of local wisdom and national values. Local wisdom such as the values of "mutual care" and "mutual help" in Lombok, or the concept of "tattvam asi" in the Hindu tradition, serves as a cultural bridge and ethical foundation for harmonious coexistence (Ummah, 2021; Putrawan et al., 2022). All these efforts must be based on Pancasila as the ideology and fundamental foundation of the Republic of Indonesia for conflict resolution and ensuring unity (Putrawan et al., 2022; Kurniawan et al., 2022). Pancasila serves as an ethical and philosophical foundation capable of harmoniously uniting the religious diversity in Indonesia [Fitria & Tanggok, 2020]. The first principle, "The Oneness of God," provides an umbrella for all religions and philosophically eliminates fundamental disagreements. The following verses reinforce the humanistic aspects, unity, and social justice that should be the practical manifestation of tolerance.

The fifth factor is the role of family and community. Tolerance development strategies must be holistic and involve both the primary environment (family and community) and the formal environment (school). Ethnographic research in Balun Village (known as the village of tolerance) shows that tolerance in early childhood is strongly formed thru three crucial aspects [Widayati & Maulidiyah, 2018]. The first aspect is the role modeling of parents and the environment. Providing examples (modeling) from adults who practice tolerance and mutual respect daily has a very high impact on the internalization of values [Widayati & Maulidiyah, 2018]. The second aspect is children's daily play activities. Spontaneous interaction in interfaith play serves as an effective communication medium to foster familiarity, break down stereotypes, and naturally assimilate cultures [Widayati & Maulidiyah, 2018]. The third aspect is community and traditional activities. Participation in mutual aid and interfaith celebrations in village activities provides concrete experiences of togetherness and cooperation [Solihin & Syafi'i, 2025; Widayati & Maulidiyah, 2018].

The sixth factor is the strategies for developing interreligious tolerance in children and adolescents. Developing tolerance in the younger generation is a long-term social investment to prevent cycles of intolerance in the future (Djamil, 2023). This effort must be carried out in an integrated manner, involving the educational environment, families, and digital media.

Children and adolescents are in a crucial phase of forming their social and religious identities. Intolerance is often rooted in ignorance and prejudice (Seran, 2025; Khan & Rao, n.d.), which is highly susceptible to being instilled at a young age thru uncontrolled exclusive religious content, especially on social media (Kurniawan et al., 2022). Therefore, the strategy must focus on preventing the recruitment of radical groups. Millennial and Gen Z generations have proven to be the primary targets of radical/extremist groups (Ummah, 2021). Early intervention with the concept of religious moderation serves as a vital counter-narrative to contain and combat these extreme views (Aprilianto et al., 2025; Mulyanti & Muhajarah, 2025). Next, the formation of collective consciousness. Tolerance development programs must shift from mere cognitive knowledge to the formation of collective consciousness and empathy thru real-life interaction. This pattern aligns with the finding that social-affective and practical-empirical learning patterns are more effective in shaping tolerant attitudes in students (Junaedi et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Intolerance in Indonesia is driven by exclusivist views, fanaticism, a lack of inclusive religious understanding, the role of social media, and religious education curricula that are not yet comprehensive. Supporting factors in building tolerance include religious moderation in education, learning patterns that stimulate practical wisdom, interfaith dialog, the role of local wisdom and national values, the role of family and community, and strategies for developing interfaith tolerance in children and adolescents.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative and critical synthesis of interdisciplinary literature to explain the development of inter-faith tolerance in Indonesia by simultaneously mapping structural challenges and enabling factors within the country's unique socio-religious context. Unlike prior studies that often focus on isolated dimensions—such as theological discourse, legal frameworks, or grassroots practices—this research systematically connects historical, sociological, educational, and policy-oriented perspectives to reveal how state ideology, religious pluralism, socio-political dynamics, and community-level interactions interact in shaping tolerance. By positioning Indonesia not merely as a case of religious diversity but as a dynamic laboratory of negotiated coexistence, the study fills a gap in the literature through a contextualized analytical framework that identifies patterns of constraint and support across levels of analysis. This contribution advances theoretical understanding of inter-faith tolerance in plural societies and provides a structured reference for policymakers, educators, and civil society actors seeking evidence-based strategies to strengthen social cohesion.

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