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Jokowi’s *Moderasi Beragama*: Challenge and Opportunity

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Muslims attend Friday prayers with social distancing measures in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic at the Golden Dome mosque in Depok, West Java on 17 September 2021. Photo: Adek Berry/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

• In 2019, the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) introduced Moderasi Beragama (Moderation of Religiosity) as a new national policy for addressing the threat of religious extremism and intolerance in Indonesia which has become more active over the past two decades. This might also have been a move to curb the political exploitation of religion which has led to identity politics and hate speech flourishing in the recent elections.

• However, this initiative does not appear to have been widely implemented, being largely confined to domains under MORA’s jurisdiction. It would achieve more impact on society if it could be extended to other ministries and state agencies, and obtain collaboration with civil society, including major Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama.

• As a policy, Moderasi Beragama needs conceptual refinement in order to tackle the increasing phenomenon of stricter sharia inclusion in the public and state sectors.

• In addition, the concept of Moderasi Beragama is so far still understood as being more targeted at the Muslim community than addressing all religious communities.
INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has been long recognized as one of the most moderate Muslim countries in the world. Its people, in general, feel proud of their reputation of being moderate and tolerant. However, over the last two decades, acts of violent extremism and religious radicalism have increased in Indonesia. Indonesian Muslims have also become increasingly conservative. Identity politics and hate speech have, for instance, flourished during the presidential election in 2014, the Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017, and the presidential election in 2019. The government of Indonesia today continues to need a strategy to address these issues, and in that context, the concept of Moderasi Beragama (Moderation of Religiosity) remains highly relevant.

This article evaluates the effectiveness of Moderasi Beragama, a policy which has been intensively promoted by the Jokowi government over the last three years through the Ministry for Religious Affairs (MORA). It highlights challenges faced in the implementation of the policy, advances some critical inputs and proposes suggestions to improve MORA’s capacity to deal with violent extremism, religious radicalism and intolerance.

MODERASI BERAGAMA

Moderasi Beragama is a policy introduced by MORA in 2019 under then-Religious Minister Lukman Hakim Saifuddin who served between 2014 and 2019. It was motivated by a desire to address the rise in violent extremism, radicalism and intolerant attitudes in Indonesian society over the preceding decade. The policy is intended not only to address religious issues facing Muslims, but also believers of other religions. The policy emphasizes three important elements. Firstly, Moderasi Beragama emphasizes humanity. Humanity here propounds that all religions believe that their core teachings are to respect and protect the dignity of human beings; teachings that violate these core teachings are therefore considered extreme or excessive. Secondly, Moderasi Beragama emphasizes the importance of consensus, recognizing that God created human diversity and plurality. Diverse and plural communities need consensus. In Islam, this consensus is called mitsaqaan ghalida (strong consensus). Thirdly, Moderasi Beragama emphasizes public order in the midst of diversity. A key goal of the policy is to ensure that people of diverse backgrounds can live together in an orderly manner. However, since the population of Indonesia is majority Muslim, Moderasi Beragama has tended to focus only on the affairs of Muslims.

The preference for the term Moderasi Beragama (Moderation of Religiosity), and not Moderasi Agama (Moderation of Religion), is significant and deliberate. The intention is to convey that the main problem lies not in the intrinsic value of “agama” (religion), but in how religion is interpreted, understood and practiced by its adherents. From MORA’s perspective, the value of religion is unquestioned, and religion itself is not a deciding factor for whether or not Indonesians, the majority of whom are Muslims, become extremist, radical or intolerant. Religion is presumed as being proper and perfect in concept, and it is its adherents who misinterpret religion for their own interest. This is MORA’s rationale for
the semantic use of the term *Moderasi Beragama*. It also reflects MORA’s desire to avoid being accused of being “liberal”.

**POLICY IMPLEMENTATION**

The Jokowi administration has allocated fairly significant resources for the implementation of *Moderasi Beragama*. The current Religious Affairs Minister Yaqut Cholil Qoumas has stressed that *Moderasi Beragama* is a prioritized programme under MORA; its budget allocation has also increased significantly from 400 billion to 3.2 trillion IDR. MORA has furthermore successfully proposed for *Moderasi Beragama* to be included in the RPJMN (Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional, Middle Term of National Development Plan) from 2020 to 2024, thus ensuring a certain degree of policy continuity for the programme.

*Moderasi Beragama* appears to be still in its early stages of implementation. It is being rolled out throughout the institutions under MORA’s purview to raise awareness of the importance of being moderate. MORA has established a taskforce to execute programmes, led by MORA secretary-general in collaboration with various MORA-affiliated institutions and universities. It holds sessions for trainers, seminars, conferences and workshops on topics related to moderation of religiosity, to the strengthening of religious tolerance, to decreasing extremism, and so on. MORA has also sought to propagate the key indicators of *Moderasi Beragama* among the public. These are: commitment to nationalism; religious tolerance; anti-violence, and; treasuring of tradition. (See the figure below)

Two important organizational vehicles are responsible for propagating *Moderasi Beragama* widely. First, at the level of MORA-affiliated universities (PTKIN), almost all institutions for Islamic higher education such as UIN, IAIN, and STAIN, have a *Rumah Moderasi Beragama* (RMB, House for Moderation of Religiosity). *Rumah Moderasi Beragama* organises seminars, trainings and workshops on issue important to *Moderasi Beragama*. Secondly, all offices of religious affairs such as KUA (Kantor Urusan Agama) have been redesignated as Houses of *Moderasi Beragama*. Zainut Tawhid (Vice Minister of Religious Affairs) has explained that KUAs are to serve as the frontline for MORA to provide community services related to religious matters (such as Islamic family law). For instance, the leaders of KUA are given knowledge about *Keluarga Sakinah* (ideal concept of family in Islam) for premarital counselling under the principle of equality between men and women in Islam. *Moderasi Beragama* is also implemented in schools in some regions. Teachers of madrasahs are to be trained to develop the concept of moderation in Islam in their curriculum and teaching.
EVALUATION

Despite the rollout of *Moderasi Beragama* to counter violent extremism, radicalism, and intolerant attitudes among religious communities in Indonesia, its impact has been questionable.

First of all, the concept of *Moderasi Beragama* has a Muslim-bias. Although the term *appears* neutral, this belies the fact that its original frame of reference has roots in Islam. The word *Moderasi* for instance is a translation of the Arabic word *wasatiyyah*.13 The term *wasatiyyah* in the Quran connotes that religious life should follow the principle of moderation. It is also inspired by the saying of Prophet Muhammad that “the best issues are of the middle way.”14 Apart from that, in daily implementation, the vocabulary, languages and discourses used by the propagators of this agenda are people who are close to Islam. On
the one hand, it indicates that it is Muslims that have to face the critical issues of violent extremism, radicalism and intolerance; on the other hand, it indicates that *Moderasi Beragama* was thought up to help the Muslim community to be moderate. The fact is, other religious communities also need to be part of this agenda.

Secondly, the agenda of *Moderasi Beragama* seems to be popular only within MORAh’s network. As a policy, *Moderasi Beragama* needs to be not only accepted by MORAh’s institutions and staff, but also by other ministries and by the general public. The scope of this policy should go beyond MORA. If it is not able to resonate with wider religious audiences, it is doubtful that *Moderasi Beragama* will impact the general Indonesian population, with its plurality of religions and ethnicities.

**SHARIA**

More fundamentally, the overall spirit of *Moderasi Beragama* seems to be contradicted by the broader accommodation of sharia into the legal and public sphere in Indonesia under Jokowi’s leadership. With Ma’ruf Amin as Vice President, Jokowi has been supportive of the intensification of the halal project; this has negatively impacted the interests and businesses of minority groups. The enactment of State Law No 33/2014 on halal product assurance has made it obligatory for all products to carry a halal label, and in effect regulates what kind of food and drinks should be consumed by citizens in their everyday life. More broadly, Jokowi has also been supportive of deepening conservatism in the practice of Islamic governance among mainstream organizations such as the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI).

The deeper issue facing *Moderasi Beragama* is how hard it can respond to increasing sharia inclusion in the legal and public sphere of Indonesia. It can be safely said that, so far, the Jokowi-Ma’ruf bureaucracy has not addressed the issue of increasing ‘shariatization’.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Although *Moderasi Agama* still needs some conceptual and practical refinements, that does not reduce its current importance for overcoming religious extremism in Indonesia. As a policy, however, *Moderasi Beragama* is still very limited and sectoral in implementation. It needs to go beyond the traditional borders of MORAh’s scope and reach out to all Indonesian citizens. Not only should it be inclusive; the government of Indonesia also has to mainstream the policy. Jokowi can learn from the success of previous governments when they mainstreamed gender issues. Gender mainstreaming started in the 1990s, and gender issues are now taken up not only in the state sector but also in Indonesian society in general. The success of gender mainstreaming would not have succeeded without the support it received from the state and from society.

Suggested steps for mainstreaming *Moderasi Beragama* include the following: First, *Moderasi Beragama* should be the chief strategy for resolving issues related to religion-based extremism, radicalism and intolerance. Second, mainstreaming *Moderasi Beragama* should have a legal base that enables MORA to reach out and coordinate with all ministries
and state institutions. It is true that MORA has already implemented Moderasi Beragama but its influence has so far been limited and internal. To succeed, Moderasi Beragama must be extended to all state ministries and institutions. Third, mainstreaming Moderasi Beragama should involve not only state but also non-state actors. This is a very important step to take to push Moderasi Beragama down to the grassroots level.

In fact, different aspects of Moderasi Beragama have been embraced by the key mainstream Muslim organizations. For instance, Nahdlatul Ulama promotes “Islam Nusantara”, Muhammadiyah advocates “Islam berkemajuan”, and MUI (Council of Indonesian Ulama) has introduced “Islam Wasatiyyah.” These three emblematic terminologies introduced by mainstream Muslim organizations are intended to support the implementation of Moderasi Beragama in a general sense. In order to avoid Moderasi Beragama being seen as a competing initiative, MORA needs to work with these organizations to coordinate and decide on a common platform. The important position of these mainstream organizations in the Muslim community must be taken into consideration. While Moderasi Beragama operates at the level of state institutions, mainstream organizations like NU, Muhammadiyah and MUI can help operationalize the programme at the grassroots level.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Moderasi Beragama is a very important agenda of Indonesia, but it needs better conceptualization, tactics and implementation. Implementing Moderasi Beragama only at the MORA level cannot be effective against violent extremism, radicalism and religious intolerance. Instead, Moderasi Beragama should be broadened to all governmental ministries and sectors in order to become broadly accepted. To avoid the perception that Moderasi Beragama focuses only on Muslims, its implementation also needs to involve non-Muslims. This can be concretely done by including representatives of non-Muslims at all levels of the Moderasi Beragama body. Lastly, MORA needs to co-opt the mainstream Muslim organizations, NU, Muhammadiyah and MUI, which have strong grassroots reach, to propagate the concept.

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9 https://kemenag.go.id/read/serius-dalam-penguatan-moderasi-beragama-nvdpy-nvdpy-nvdpy, viewed on 22 October 2021


13 MUI also uses the term wasatiyyah as Arabic term for moderasi beragama. See https://republika.co.id/berita/dunia-islam/islam-nusantara/17/12/16/p116am396-mui-mulai-sosialisasikan-dakwah-islam-wasathiyah, viewed on 8 August 2021.

14 The Arabic version, “khayr al-umur awsatuha.”