DELIBERATIVE LOCAL LEADERSHIP AS A MECHANISM FOR RELIGIOUS MODERATION: EVIDENCE FROM A MULTIRELIGIOUS VILLAGE

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Abstract:

Religious diversity presents opportunities and challenges for social harmony, especially in multireligious rural communities. Existing studies tend to examine normative frameworks, state policies, and institutional approaches, leaving little attention to the practice of religious moderation at the grassroots level. This study fills this gap by analyzing village heads and Sapta Darma leaders who apply deliberative leadership and public governance mechanisms to religious issues. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with village heads and religious leaders and supported by documentation from the village. The findings show that religious moderation in Sukoreno is achieved through deliberative leadership, as demonstrated by inclusive deliberation, continuous dialogue, and collaborative decision-making involving leaders from various communities. Deliberative leadership is further strengthened and made more effective through local practices such as njagong (informal communal interaction) and andhap asor (humility and respect). Village leadership also demonstrates inclusiveness by recognizing indigenous belief communities, including Sapto Darmo, as part of local religiosity. Differences in religious practices and celebrations are deliberated and mutually respected.

Keywords: Deliberative leadership, Religious moderation, Sapta Darma, Multireligious society, Local Wisdom

Abstrak:

Keragaman agama menghadirkan peluang dan tantangan bagi harmoni sosial, terutama pada masyarakat pedesaan yang multireligius. Beberapa studi yang sudah ada cenderung mengkaji kerangka normatif, kebijkan negara, dan pendekatan institusional, sehingga praktik moderasi beragama di tingkat akar rumput sosial masih kurang mendapat perhatian. Kajian ini mengisi kesenjangan tersebut dengan menganalisis kepala desa dan tokoh Sapta Darma menerapkan kepemimpinan deliberatif dan mekanisme tata kelola publik terhadap isu-isu keagamaan. Menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan kepala desa dan tokoh agama serta didukung oleh dokumentasi dari desa. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa moderasi beragama di Sukoreno melalui kepemimpinan deliberatif, ditunjukkan dengan musyawarah

inklusif, dialog berkelanjutan, dan pengambilan keputusan kolaboratif yang melibatkan pemimpin dari berbagai komunitas. Kepemimpinan deliberatif semakin efektif dan diperkuat melalui kebijaksanaan lokal seperti *njagong* (interaksi komunal informal) dan *andhap asor* (kerendahan hati dan rasa hormat). Kepemimpinan desa juga menunjukkan inklusivitas dengan mengakui komunitas keyakinan asli, termasuk Sapto Darmo, sebagai bagian dari keagamaan lokal. Perbedaan dalam praktik dan perayaan keagamaan dimusyawarahkan secara deliberasi dan saling menghormati.

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan eliberatif, Moderasi Beragama, Sapta Darma, Masyarakat multireligius, Kebijaksanan Lokal

INTRODUCTION

Religious moderation is a strategic agenda in reducing friction over religious identity differences to build social cohesion, create heterogeneous pluralistic communities, and realize a peaceful social ecosystem (Sholeh & Rahman, 2025). Several regions in Indonesia have created practical spaces in society for coexistence by establishing Religious Moderation Villages (KMB), where moderation is actualized through interfaith dialogue, mediation by local leaders and religious figures, strengthening tolerance values through joint activities, and internalizing values through socialization activities (Junaidi et al., 2025). On the other hand, social harmony in a pluralistic society does not form automatically, even with forums for interfaith dialogue, governing laws, and the roles of leaders and state policies (Dachlan, 2023). Empirically, factors that influence this include deep-rooted social prejudice, unequal social practices, rejection of individual or group differences, and a lack of awareness of the importance of respect (Azizah & Rahmawati, 2025; Armayanto et al., 2024).

Religious moderation is an effective strategy in dealing with extremism and radicalism that can threaten social harmony, especially in multicultural social spaces (Mulyanti & Muhajarah, 2025). Public policy is required to continuously maintain its role in strengthening bureaucracy, increasing trust among citizens, and fostering social cohesion through the internalization of religious moderation values, despite the various challenges faced (Hafith et al., 2025; Sasmita et al., 2025). In addition, religious practices also contribute to the joint project of religious leaders to bridge peace through a structural approach as a universal social space management system (Ritonga & Husni, 2025). In a pluralistic society, religious moderation serves as a foundation and conceptual framework that encourages the formation of tolerant social relations, adaptive diversity practices, and inclusive and equitable attitudes.

Multireligious villages are a suitable setting for concrete religious moderation practices, given their ideal coverage for studying their application at the grassroots level. Several studies discuss diverse moderation villages and their implications for the psychological aspects of individuals and community groups that are more responsive to differences in religious identity. The philosophy of local cultural wisdom is an important instrument that underpins social activities and serves as a foundation for harmony and tolerance in pluralistic societies (Huda et al., 2022). Not only does it address social cohesion, but with appropriate infrastructure and management, religious moderation is not only seen as a social challenge but also

enriches the appeal of tourism as an educational destination (Prasetyo et al., 2025).

With respect to deliberative leadership, the roles of village heads, religious leaders, and traditional leaders should be regarded as central and authoritative decision-makers, mediators, and facilitators in the empirical internalization of religious moderation within society. Deliberation extends beyond mere informative discussion, strengthening interpersonal relationships, fostering an inclusive organizational culture, and functioning as a conflict management strategy characterized by openness and bureaucratic processes (Sunarno & Zakiyah, 2024). Leaders in rural, particularly multicultural, communities act as experts in elucidating social and cultural foundations to reinforce interfaith harmony. This stems from the capacity of local leadership to coordinate differences with robust authority, positioning them as key drivers of communal integration (Ardianto et al., 2025). The active engagement of leaders in managing pluralistic communities has been shown to effectively involve youth (Sarbunan, 2025; Ulum et al., 2024) and illustrates that visionary leadership significantly contributes to community synergy in maintaining social harmony.

The deliberative practices observed in Sukoreno are in line with Habermas' (1992) concept of communicative action, in which legitimacy arises from rational discourse oriented towards mutual understanding rather than strategic domination. In this context, the village forum functions not only as an administrative mechanism, but also as a communicative space where diverse religious actors engage in dialogue, negotiate differences, and collectively construct shared norms for social coexistence. Such interactions demonstrate that authority is maintained through discursive inclusion and mutual recognition, which strengthens social trust and communal stability. Simultaneously, village governance reflects Rawls' (1993) idea of public reason, as local policies are justified through arguments accessible to citizens from different religious backgrounds. Rather than prioritizing a particular theological doctrine, the decision-making process relies on considerations that are publicly defensible and acceptable to members of various religious traditions. Together, these deliberative and justificatory dimensions illustrate how local leadership in Sukoreno institutionalizes religious moderation through communicative rationality and normatively inclusive governance.

Although religious moderation and local governance have been extensively examined within Indonesian scholarship, these two domains are frequently treated as distinct analytical concerns. Research on religious moderation tends to emphasize state policies, interfaith initiatives, or theological reinterpretations designed to mitigate extremism. In contrast, studies on local leadership primarily concentrate on administrative performance and decentralization, often neglecting the discursive and normative management of religious diversity. This oversight has resulted in inadequate consideration of how village-level deliberative practices effectively shape, sustain, and institutionalize religious moderation within the framework of everyday governance.

Moreover, while deliberative democratic theory—particularly the notions of communicative action and public reason—has been thoroughly developed in political philosophy, its application to grassroots governance in multireligious rural contexts remains insufficiently explored. There is a lack of empirical analysis regarding the

functioning of deliberative leadership within culturally embedded communal forums and how such processes foster legitimacy and social cohesion across religious boundaries. This study seeks to investigate how local leadership in Sukoreno operates as a practical mechanism for integrating religious moderation into the governance of the village.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with field research to thoroughly analyse deliberative local leadership and understand how religious moderation is internalised in multireligious villages. This approach was chosen because the study's emphasis is not on quantifying variables but on enriching understanding of social processes, relationships among key figures, and the dynamics of deliberation within the community's social ecosystem. The research site was purposefully selected in a multireligious village that has practical experience in managing diversity through deliberative forums and interfaith activities. Key informants included the village head, interfaith religious leaders, traditional leaders, and community representatives.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and local documents related to religious moderation. The analysis was conducted thematically to identify the relationship between deliberative practices, the role of local leadership, and the internalization of religious moderation values. Data validity was maintained through source and technique triangulation, as well as communication of findings to key informants (Neuman, 2014). This approach enabled researchers to provide a clear, concise empirical picture of the social mechanisms underlying deliberative leadership in strengthening community social relations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Sukoreno Village exemplifies a multi-religious community characterized by a high degree of tolerance, in which residents coexist in harmony, unity, and religious devotion. According to Mr. H. Ach. Choiri (village head), the village was formerly part of Gumuk Lengar Village in Kencong District and traces its origins to Tanah Reco, an area historically inhabited and developed by community elders. The presence of relics from the Majapahit era and distinctive trees bearing colorful flowers symbolize the village's longstanding diversity and harmonious relations. The name "Sukoreno" derives from the words "Suko" (flower) and "Reno" (diversity), aptly reflecting the community's rich cultural and religious mosaic. This diversity encompasses Muslims, Catholics, Hindus, and adherents of Sapta Darma, all of whom live together peacefully. Such historical and symbolic contexts serve as the foundation for the practice of religious moderation at the community level. Diversity is not only normalized but is actively expressed in daily social interactions. Consequently, the unique context of Sukoreno Village provides a crucial basis for deliberative leadership in managing social and religious differences (Interview, 2025).

Figure 1. Pancasila Village Monument in Sukoreno Village



Interpersonal relationships among residents of Sukoreno are characterized by a high degree of harmony and clearly observable practices of religious tolerance. For instance, it is common to find individuals of different religious affiliations within the same family lineage—such as a Muslim whose parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents are Catholic or Hindu (Interview, 2025). The village head routinely engages in field visits, fostering communication with interfaith leaders to facilitate open dialogue and proactively address potential sources of conflict. As a social mediator, the village head reinforces the network of inter-resident relationships and upholds mutual respect. These efforts build communal trust and exemplify inclusive deliberative leadership. Community support for such leadership is evidenced by residents' active participation in village events and discussions. The village head's role extends beyond administrative duties to encompass social and cultural responsibilities, particularly as a facilitator of interfaith engagement. The persistence of harmonious social relations serves as the cornerstone for the implementation of religious moderation at the grassroots level. Consequently, the village head functions as the principal unifying force within this multireligious community.

Sukoreno possesses an interfaith institutional framework, comprising the Religious Harmony Council (KUB) at the village level and the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) at the sub-district and district levels, both of which include administrators representing various religious communities (Interview, 2025). Decision-making is conducted through collective deliberation to ensure inclusivity and peaceful conflict resolution. A notable example occurred in 2024–2025, when divergent opinions arose regarding the commencement of fasting. The village head, in collaboration with Hindu and Muslim communities, facilitated an agreement stipulating that "*ogoh-ogoh performances will be held in their respective venues, and takbir parades will be confined to mosques and musala without competition*." Such deliberative forums indicate that deliberative leadership transcends mere procedural formality, manifesting as a practical and adaptive response to evolving social dynamics. This approach enhances social cohesion, diminishes the likelihood of conflict, and exemplifies effective pluralism management. Interfaith institutions in Sukoreno function efficiently as both formal mechanisms and symbolic expressions of the community's commitment to tolerance. Hence, the deliberative process constitutes the foundation of religious moderation grounded in local leadership.

Figure 2. Deliberation to decide on The Celebration of Important Holidays between Hindu (left) and Muslim Residents (right)





The Sapta Darma community in Sukoreno has received formal recognition from the village government since 2018, with Mr. Sunyoto currently presiding over meetings and discussions (Interview, 2025). The central tenets of Sapta Darma encompass prostration, the use of personal symbols, and the observance of the seven *muwara* and *sesanti*, all of which are integrated into daily spiritual practice. Prostration is enacted as an expression of submission to the Divine, with men seated cross-legged and women positioned on their heels, symbolizing profound spiritual awareness and a reminder of humanity's earthly origins. The ultimate aim of Sapta Darma, encapsulated in the principle of *Memayu Hayu Bagyo Bawono*, is the attainment of worldly happiness and universal sustainability, achieved through devotion to God, filial piety, loyalty to the state, and a commitment to social and environmental responsibility. Members of the Sapta Darma community exemplify harmonious coexistence, demonstrating tolerance not only in interpersonal relationships but also toward the broader environment. The presence of Sapta Darma demonstrates that deliberative leadership at the village level can acknowledge minority communities while fostering social integration. Consequently, Sapta Darma constitutes an essential component in advancing local religious moderation.

Figure 3. Sapta Darma adherents performing prostration at the Busono Temple in Sukoreno



Figure 4. The Population and Civil Registration Office is Conducting Population Data Adjustments for Members of The Sapta Darma Community.



Local wisdom in Sukoreno, such as the practices of *njagong* (casual interaction between residents) and *andhap asor* (humility and mutual respect), strengthens the effectiveness of deliberative leadership (Interview, 2025). These practices build trust,

minimize potential conflicts, and strengthen sustainable social cohesion. Village heads face challenges, especially when several young people or individuals have the potential to cause friction, so motivation and understanding become important strategies. This local wisdom serves as a tool to support dialogue, collaboration, and inclusive decision-making. In addition, local cultural practices act as a bridge between formal leadership and community participation, facilitating religious moderation in practice.

Table 1. Reconstruction of Religious Moderation Patterns in Deliberative Local Leadership

Empirical Aspects Studied	Moderation Patterns Found	Conceptual Reconstruction
Status of local beliefs in village structures	Local beliefs (Sapta Darma) are recognised through daily social practices and administrative recognition by the village	Religious moderation operates as a practice of local citizenship, in which social inclusion precedes normative recognition by the state
Management of differences in ritual and religious celebrations	Interfaith celebrations are managed through cross-community deliberations facilitated by local leaders	Religious moderation is shaped by adaptive deliberative mechanisms, not merely by passive tolerance
Village head leadership	The village head acts as a facilitator, dialogist, mediator, and balancer of social relations	Local leadership functions as a non-dogmatic moderating figure, working through social legitimacy rather than religious authority
Local value base (*Njagong/jagongan, andhap asor*)	Local values can ease communication, build trust, and reduce potential friction	Prudence functions as cultural capital for moderation, instilling an ethic of living together in diversity

Source: Assessment data, 2025

Conceptual Model of Deliberative Religious Moderation

This study advances a conceptual model elucidating the ways in which deliberative local leadership facilitates the institutionalization of religious moderation within a multireligious village context. Rather than serving solely as a procedural consultation, deliberation functions as a normative and relational mechanism that shapes collective legitimacy and fosters social cohesion. Drawing upon empirical findings from Sukoreno, the model comprises four interrelated dimensions: deliberative process, social trust, religious moderation, and institutional stability.

First, the deliberative process encompasses both structured and informal communicative forums wherein community members from diverse religious backgrounds engage in dialogue, negotiation, and collective problem-solving. These processes are typified by inclusivity, equitable participation, and justification through publicly accessible reasoning. Through sustained communicative engagement, local leadership cultivates reciprocal recognition among religious groups.

Second, repeated deliberative interactions cultivate social trust, understood as mutual confidence in the fairness, neutrality, and reliability of local governance. Trust emerges not solely from formal authority, but from transparent dialogue and the perceived willingness of leaders to accommodate diverse religious concerns. In this sense, trust becomes the mediating variable linking deliberative practice to broader social outcomes.

Third, the consolidation of social trust enables the normalization of religious moderation. Moderation is not imposed as a top-down ideological program, but institutionalized through shared norms that discourage exclusivism and encourage coexistence. Through public reasoning and dialogical engagement, religious differences are managed constructively rather than competitively.

Finally, sustained religious moderation contributes to institutional stability, reflected in reduced interreligious tensions, strengthened communal cooperation, and the durability of inclusive governance structures. Stability, therefore, is not merely administrative continuity, but the outcome of deliberatively produced legitimacy.

The model can be summarized as follows:

Deliberative Process → Social Trust → Religious Moderation → Institutional Stability

This conceptual framework moves the analysis beyond descriptive case reporting by offering a theoretical explanation of how deliberative leadership functions as a mechanism of religious moderation in pluralistic local settings.

The empirical findings summarised in the table show that religious moderation at the village level is not solely the result of the internalisation of state norms or formal regulations, but is shaped by deliberative local leadership practices rooted in everyday social relations. Therefore, these findings are further analysed within the framework of deliberative local leadership to explain how deliberation, the management of ritual differences, the recognition of local beliefs, and the utilisation of local values contribute to the formation of religious moderation in a multireligious village context.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that religious moderation in Sukoreno Village is not merely a normative discoThe findings of this study indicate that religious moderation in Sukoreno Village is not merely a normative discourse but rather the outcome of deliberative social practices conducted by the village head and religious leaders, including members of the Sapta Darma community. These deliberative practices include inclusive discussions, ongoing dialogue, and joint decision-making involving various religious groups, which support social cohesion and tolerance. These practices are not the result of a course but rather of deliberative social practices

carried out by the village head, religious leaders, and the Sapta Darma community (Karim, 2025). This is in line with findings in other studies showing that religious leaders and local figures play an important role in strengthening awareness and cohesion of religious moderation in multicultural societies (Muntoha, 2024), thereby contributing to social harmony and stability in a mutually accepting society (Dwi & Wardani, 2025).

In addition, interfaith institutional structures such as KUB and FKUB in Sukoreno, which are managed collaboratively, serve as platforms for such deliberative practices. This reinforces the literature that community leadership and institutions are important for promoting dialogue and conflict resolution grounded in moderation, especially in the context of complex social pluralism (Amtiran & Kriswibowo, 2024; Majid & Izzah, 2024). In this study, deliberative forums are employed as an effective mechanism for resolving social disputes, such as disagreements regarding the timing of significant religious holidays that occur around the same period, by facilitating mutually agreed-upon solutions rather than relying on unilateral decisions (Fajar et al., 2023). Dialogic discussions highlight that addressing issues within multicultural societies can alleviate tensions and promote fair, balanced decisions, thereby reducing social jealousy (Neger et al., 2025).

Another important finding is the role of local wisdom, such as *njagong/jagongan* and *andhap asor*. These cultural practices are social assets that strengthen religious moderation, functioning as informal mechanisms that support formal deliberative processes. This concept is in line with literature that emphasises that local wisdom can be a strong foundation for religious moderation in pluralistic societies, where local cultural values help internalise norms of tolerance and harmony in everyday interactions (Muthoharoh et al., 2024; Asikin, 2021). Other studies also show that integrating local wisdom into religious moderation has been proven to broaden social awareness, strengthen solidarity, and weaken the dominance of conflict narratives through internalised cultural practices (Nasriandi et al., 2023).

In the context of the recognition of minority communities such as Sapta Darma, these findings show that the deliberative process not only accommodates majority groups but also provides an inclusive space for religious identities that are not always recognized normatively by state policy. This contributes to the study of religious moderation, which has so far emphasized the values of tolerance and anti-radicalism, but has not yet explored how local leaders manage differences in non-formal religious identities in everyday social practices. The literature on religious moderation generally emphasizes moderation as a value of balance (*tawasuth, tasamuh, tawazun*) in interfaith relations, which is relevant for strengthening attitudes of tolerance and inclusivity. In the context of the recognition of minority communities such as Sapta Darma, these findings show that the deliberative process not only accommodates majority groups but also provides an inclusive space for religious identities that are not always recognized normatively by state policy ('Azah & Sholeh, 2025). However, Sukoreno's findings add an empirical dimension to the interaction between deliberative leadership and local culture.

Finally, the combination of deliberative leadership and local wisdom in this study confirms a more contextual and community-based framework for religious moderation, in which moderation is not merely an institutional policy or normative

application. Still, it is realised through sustainable local social and cultural practices. This is in line with Parhusip's (2024) argument that religious moderation leadership must be rooted in local traditions, not just in doctrinal models of religion or normative texts (Parhusip, 2023). Local traditions offer a neutral and inclusive value framework that can be applied across various religions within diverse communities (Tohari & Nafiuddin, 2025; Zubaidi & Jali, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study shows that religious moderation in Sukoreno Village is realised through the deliberative leadership of the village head and religious leaders, who emphasise inclusive consultation, ongoing dialogue, and collective decision-making processes. The application of local wisdom—such as the customs of njagong and andhap asor—strengthens the deliberative process, fosters mutual trust among residents, reduces the potential for conflict, and promotes sustainable social cohesion. Formal recognition and accommodation of minority communities, such as Sapta Darma, further illustrate an inclusive approach to moderation that has been largely overlooked in previous research. As a result, this study makes a new contribution by providing empirical evidence that religious moderation at the village level goes beyond normative policies and emerges from authentic interactions among deliberative local leadership, indigenous cultural values, and recognition of religious pluralism and minority beliefs. These findings confirm that community-based and culturally rooted strategies are effective models for fostering sustainable harmony, tolerance, and social cohesion in multireligious societies.

In contrast to earlier studies that regard religious moderation mainly as a consequence of state policy or part of the official religious normative framework, this study demonstrates that at the village level, religious moderation arises from deliberative practices of local leadership. These practices serve as mechanisms of everyday citizenship, especially hrough their capacity to recognize and accommodate local belief.

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