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Article

Social transformation of solo city, indonesia: from the stigma of radicalism to the emergence of moderate islamic identity

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ABSTRACT

Surakarta City has long been associated with religious radicalism, positioning it as a critical site for studying Islamic moderation in Indonesia. This study aims to explore how religious communities in Surakarta construct and negotiate a moderate Islamic identity through the use of symbols and narratives, in response to stigmatization as a center of extremism. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine religious leaders from various organizations, participatory observations, and analysis of religious documents and local media. Thematic coding and triangulation techniques were used to ensure analytical rigor and validity. The findings reveal that symbols such as traditional attire, inclusive religious rituals, and narratives rooted in local Islamic history are strategically mobilized to promote a peaceful and nationalist version of Islam. These symbolic strategies serve not only to legitimize the presence of moderate communities in public space but also to resist and counter radical stereotypes. The study demonstrates that Islamic moderation at the local level emerges through complex, deliberate cultural processes rather than passive adaptation. It contributes to the discourse on community-based religious moderation and provides empirical insights for culturally grounded deradicalization policies.

Keywords:

Islamic moderation
Narrative politics
Social constructivism
Symbolic representation
Religious identity

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Introduction

Indonesia is widely recognized as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world and is often cited internationally as a proponent of moderate, tolerant, and democratic Islam. However, the narrative of moderate Islam is not monolithic and has unfolded unevenly across different regions. Some areas, rather than being automatically aligned with this national identity, have struggled to distance themselves from previous associations with religious radicalism. The city of Solo presents a compelling example of such tensions, where religious identity has been shaped through contested interactions between radicalism and evolving discourses of moderation.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Solo was widely portrayed in both domestic and international media as a hub of Islamic radicalism (Aidulsyah, 2023). The city was home to several Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), clerics, and transnational networks that were reportedly involved in violent extremism and anti-pluralist movements (Barton, 2020). This perception was further reinforced by high-profile incidents, including terrorist affiliations, sweeping raids by

vigilante groups, and episodes of interreligious tension (Priyatna, 2024). Consequently, Solo became stigmatized as a stronghold of radical ideologies.

Nevertheless, in recent years, Solo's image has undergone a significant transformation. The construction of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque a symbol of diplomatic collaboration between Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates along with the growing promotion of interfaith and intercultural dialogue in public spaces, signals an intriguing process of social transformation worthy of scholarly attention (Priyatna, 2024). Local government authorities, religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), as well as civil society groups, have played crucial roles in reconstructing the city's identity as a representation of moderate Islam in Indonesia (Adison & Muassomah, 2020).

This transformation raises important academic and practical questions: How can a formerly radicalized urban religious identity be transformed into a moderate one? Who are the key actors, what mechanisms are involved, and how are symbols and narratives employed in this process? Although the discourse of moderate Islam has been embedded in national policies and international diplomacy (Umar, 2016; Zuhdi, 2018), there remains a lack of grounded studies that examine how these processes unfold at the local level, particularly through the lens of social constructivism (Kamaludin et al., 2024). Yet, a local-level analysis can provide more concrete insights into how ideologies, narratives, and religious symbols are negotiated within specific socio-political contexts (Zahra et al., 2024).

Studies on Radicalism and Moderate Islam in Indonesia

The discourse on Islamic radicalism in Indonesia has gained significant scholarly attention, particularly since the post-Reformation era of 1998. Studies by scholars such as Baidhawy and Wildan have mapped the emergence of radical Islamic groups in the Solo Raya region, including the role of certain pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), transnational ideological networks, and their impact on national security. These studies highlight that radicalism is not merely a religious issue but is deeply rooted in social inequality, political marginalization, and identity exclusion.

In contrast, research on moderate Islam seeks to reclaim Islamic discourse by promoting inclusivity, tolerance, and balance (wasathiyah). The Ministry of Religious Affairs, particularly under Lukman Hakim Saifuddin (2014-2019), institutionalized the concept of religious moderation as a normative framework that rejects both religious extremism and radical secularism (Ubaidillah et al., 2025). This narrative underscores Islam's compatibility with democratic citizenship, pluralism, and nationhood.

However, much of the existing literature remains normative and descriptive, focusing primarily on the promotion of moderation values without providing a detailed account of how social and political processes reshape religious identity at the local level. This is the analytical gap that the present study seeks to address.

Social Constructivism and Religious Identity

To bridge this analytical gap, this study adopts social constructivism as its theoretical foundation. Social constructivism posits that reality, including religious identity, is not fixed or inherent but is constructed through interactions, language, symbols, and institutional practices (Roziqin et al., 2025). It challenges essentialist and static views of Islam by focusing on how meaning is co-produced by actors within specific sociopolitical contexts.

From this perspective, moderate Islam is not simply a theological doctrine or moral stance. It is a negotiated identity that is continuously shaped by government policies, religious discourse, community rituals, and symbolic architecture. Public events such as interfaith festivals, the establishment of iconic landmarks like the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, and discursive practices by local leaders and media all contribute to reconstructing what it means to be a "moderate" Muslim in Solo.

Erbas (Deportes et al., 2024) emphasizes that such identity transformation involves a relational interplay between structure and agency. Religious change is neither purely top-down nor entirely organic. Instead, it emerges through the interaction between institutional power, such as that held by the state and religious authorities, and grassroots initiatives including youth groups, NGOs, and educational actors. This constructivist lens is particularly useful for analyzing the dynamic transformation of Solo s religious identity from a city associated with radicalism into one envisioned as a center of moderation.

Recent Studies on Islamic Moderation at the Local Level

In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined Islamic moderation within more localized contexts. (Hakim, 2021) explore the practices of interfaith communities in promoting social cohesion, while (Lund, 2021) discusses the ideological challenges posed by religious conservatism in Islamic schools. However, few studies focus on cities as analytical units or view them as symbolic spaces where the politics of religion, identity, and public representation converge.

One notable exception is the work of (Desportes et al., 2024), which compares Solo and Yogyakarta in their responses to religious intolerance. Nevertheless, this study does not thoroughly explore the constructive and symbolic mechanisms through which local actors reframe public narratives. There remains a gap in understanding how cities can undergo discursive transformation in their religious identities, not merely through policy reforms but also through the performative use of symbols, rituals, and institutional narratives.

Based on the literature reviewed above, this study seeks to address three main research gaps: (1) the scarcity of studies on the transformation of urban-based religious identity following the stigmatization of radicalism; (2) the lack of integration between social constructivist approaches and studies on Islamic moderation within urban contexts; and (3) the limited scholarly attention given to the symbolic and narrative roles such as mosques, festivals, and media in collectively shaping a moderate Islamic identity. This research aims to address these gaps by offering a constructivist analysis of Solo as a case study in urban religious transformation. In doing so, it contributes to the theoretical development of Islamic studies and the practical discourse surrounding religious policy, interfaith harmony, and counter-radicalization efforts at the municipal level(Ali et al., 2021).

Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach rooted in social constructivist epistemology. It explores how religious identity, particularly Islamic moderation, is constructed, negotiated, and symbolized within the urban context of Solo, Indonesia. Rather than establishing causal relationships, this research seeks to understand how meaning is co-produced through narratives, symbols, and practices. The focus lies in capturing the depth of social dynamics and interpretive processes underlying the transformation of Solo s religious identity from radicalism to moderation (Shahreen, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in social constructivism, which views social reality, including religious identity, as a product of interactions between individuals and social structures. Within this framework, moderate Islam is understood not as a fixed theological category, but as a negotiated and contextual identity shaped through symbolic actions, institutional discourses, and collective narratives (Whittle & Mueller, 2020). This framework facilitates analysis of how meanings surrounding moderation are constructed and disseminated, who the key actors are, and how specific symbols such as mosques, public rituals, and media representations shape public perceptions of Islam.

Data Sources

This study utilizes two main sources of data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the construction of moderate Islamic identity in Solo. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with 18 key informants, including: (1) Five representatives from major Islamic organizations (Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama); (2) Three municipal officials (culture and religious affairs); (3) Four community activists and NGO leaders; (4) Three academic experts in Islamic studies and social change; (5) Three youth leaders involved in interfaith initiatives

Informants were selected using the snowball sampling method, in which initial respondents recommended other relevant individuals with substantial insight into the research topic. This approach allows for a deeper and broader exploration of the roles played by these actors in shaping and disseminating the narrative of moderate Islam (Kelly & McAdam, 2023).

Meanwhile, the secondary data used in this study includes regional policy documents, local media archives, academic publications, historical records, and reports from relevant institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag), the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT), and the Solo City Government (Bao & Feng, 2023). These documents provide broader context regarding government and institutional efforts to shape the religious and social atmosphere in Solo and offer deeper insights into the structural factors influencing the construction of moderate Islamic identity in the region. By combining both types of data, this study aims to present a more holistic understanding of the processes and dynamics involved in the formation of moderate religious identity in Solo.

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection techniques in this study employed three primary approaches to obtain in-depth and comprehensive information regarding moderate Islam and the social dynamics in Solo. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the perceptions, narratives, and strategies developed by social actors concerning religious moderation (Kim, 2025). This method provided the researcher with the flexibility to engage in open-ended discussions while maintaining a clear focus on key issues aligned with the research objectives. Second, participant observation conducted at six religious and interfaith events between January and May 2024. These included mosque inaugurations, peace festivals, and youth-led interfaith dialogues.

Observation focused on symbolic gestures, discourse, and spatial arrangements related to moderation. Through this approach, the researcher directly engaged in these activities to observe firsthand the social dynamics, communicative practices, and symbolic expressions used to promote religious moderation. This observational method offered richer insights into how moderate Islam is practiced within broader social and cultural contexts. Third, document analysis was performed on official narratives produced by governmental and religious institutions concerning themes of moderation and tolerance. These documents included government policies, publications by religious organizations, and media archives that provided perspectives on the efforts made to construct and disseminate the discourse of moderate Islam. All interviews conducted during this research were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the collected data, thereby providing a reliable foundation for subsequent analysis. These data collection techniques were intended to generate a clear and nuanced understanding of the construction process of moderate Islamic identity in Solo.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using thematic analysis, which involved three main stages to identify thematic patterns within the collected data (Yin et al., 2025). The analysis was supported by NVivo software to organize the themes systematically and was guided by a constructivist logic that emphasizes meaning-making within socio-political contexts.

The first stage was *open coding*, in which the researcher identified 42 initial categories from interview transcripts and gathered documents, including actors, values, narratives, and symbolic practices such as *national image-making, tolerance rhetoric,* and *the sacralization of public*

spaces. In this phase, various statements, phrases, or ideas related to key themes such as moderate Islamic narratives, social actors, and symbolic elements were coded to form an initial structure of the data and provide early insights into which themes warranted deeper analysis.

The second stage was *axial coding*, aimed at linking the thematic categories identified in the previous step. These categories were grouped into broader thematic clusters, such as state religion synergy, youth-driven moderation narratives, and religious symbolism in urban spaces (McEwan, 2025). This process examined the interrelations among categories and the interaction between various social elements in shaping the moderate Islamic identity in Solo, particularly how symbols were strategically used to influence public perception.

The final stage, *selective coding*, involved synthesizing the core themes to craft a coherent narrative of how religious moderation is constructed and practiced in Solo. In this phase, the most relevant and significant thematic categories were selected to portray the social dynamics, narratives, and symbolic practices that contribute to the formation of a moderate Islamic identity (Zhang, 2025). Emphasis was placed on narrative alignment, symbolic institutionalization, and the local reinterpretation of Islamic identity. The analysis was conducted inductively, allowing patterns and themes to emerge organically from the data. Nevertheless, the interpretation remained grounded in the framework of social constructivism, which guided the understanding of how social realities particularly moderate Islamic identity are constructed and given meaning by social actors in the context of Solo.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative data in this study, several strategies were employed to enhance the accuracy and consistency of the findings.

First, source triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from various actors and documents. This approach enabled the researcher to verify the credibility of the data by examining the consistency or discrepancies among multiple sources, including interviews with community leaders, government officials, direct observations, and relevant official documents. Triangulation served as a means to reduce bias and strengthen the overall credibility of the analysis.

Second, member checking was conducted by presenting initial interpretations to selected informants for clarification. This step aimed to ensure that the researcher s understanding of the collected data truly reflected the perspectives of the informants. By obtaining direct feedback, the researcher could verify whether the interpretations aligned with the intended meanings and experiences of the involved parties, thereby enhancing the authenticity and representativeness of the research findings (Darvin, 2022).

Third, researcher reflexivity was employed as a strategy to acknowledge and consider the researcher s positionality and potential biases throughout the interpretive process. The researcher actively maintained a self-reflective log documenting personal positioning, underlying values, and the possible influence of subjectivity in data collection and analysis. This ongoing self-awareness was crucial to maintaining objectivity and transparency while mitigating biases that could compromise the reliability and dependability of the research outcomes. By consistently implementing these three strategies, the study reinforces the credibility, transferability, and dependability of its findings (Selvi et al., 2024).

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with fundamental ethical principles of social research to ensure that all procedures were carried out ethically and with full respect for participants' rights. Prior to conducting interviews or any other form of data collection, all participants provided informed consent. They were given a clear explanation of the study s objectives, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. This ensured that participation was both voluntary and fully informed (Godskesen et al., 2023).

The confidentiality of participants identities was strictly maintained according to their preferences. The researcher was committed to preserving anonymity and safeguarding personal information so that no individuals could be directly identified in the published findings. Identifying information was also removed from the transcripts to guarantee confidentiality.

All research procedures were reviewed and approved by the institutional ethics committee, ensuring that the implementation of the study adhered to established ethical standards. Thus, the study was conducted with careful consideration for the well-being, rights, and privacy of the participants and in full compliance with professional ethical guidelines throughout the research process (Ehidiamen & Oladapo, 2024).

Results and Discussion

Historical Narratives: Solo as a Tinderbox

Historical Narratives: Solo as a Tinderbox For many years, the city of Solo has been known as an area with a relatively high level of religion-based conflict, reflecting its complex and often tense social dynamics. The long history of ethnic conflict between Chinese and Javanese communities, dating back to the 18th century, has significantly shaped the city s social interaction patterns. Although this ethnic tension has not been continuously eruptive, it has often resurfaced in the form of deep-rooted distrust and social friction among specific societal groups. In the post-reform era, Solo also emerged as one of the regions experiencing the rise and proliferation of radical religious organizations, further exacerbating the city's vulnerability to extremism. Groups such as Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), and Laskar Jihad formed in the wake of political reforms contributed to an increasingly volatile situation by promoting militant ideologies that often clashed with the city's traditions of pluralism and social harmony (Kang & Hwang, 2021).

Various reports have portrayed Solo as a tinderbox, or as it is locally referred to as a 'short fuse,' a metaphor highlighting its high susceptibility to sudden outbreaks of conflict. Accumulated religious, ethnic, and political tensions over the years have intensified the city's potential for social instability. Solo has often been described as a volatile space where social unrest can quickly escalate into violence involving fragmented groups divided by religious, ethnic, or ideological lines (Alhabsi, 2024).

This situation has been further aggravated by the frequency of raids conducted by radical mass organizations targeting communities or individuals they perceive as deviating from their rigid interpretations of religious teachings. Moreover, the presence of Islamic boarding schools associated with global terrorist networks, such as Pondok Al-Mukmin Ngruki, has reinforced Solo's negative image as a breeding ground for radicalization. This particular school is widely known for its ties to prominent terrorist figures like Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, who played a significant role in shaping extremist thought in Indonesia (Carthy, 2020).

The involvement of several Solo residents in international terrorism networks such as connections to Noordin M. Top and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir has further entrenched the stigma that Solo is fertile ground for the growth of extremist ideologies. These cases have received extensive media coverage, intensifying the negative portrayal of the city both nationally and internationally. Media outlets play a substantial role in shaping and reinforcing this narrative, contributing to the collective perception of Solo as vulnerable to radical actions and terrorism (Schmid, 2022).

As a result, the narrative of Solo as a "short fuse" has become deeply embedded in the collective consciousness at both local and global levels, forming part of the city's identity. Local and international media have reinforced this image through frequent reporting on conflicts, violent incidents, and the presence of radical groups in the region (Gupta, 2020). Although Solo is historically rich in religious traditions and cultural heritage, public discourse often reduces its identity to that of a conflict-prone city, perpetuating a social stigma that continues to shape its image domestically and abroad.

These negative narratives also emerge in informants' perceptions of Solo. One informant from the Ministry of Religion stated:

"*Kalau ngomongin Solo ya itu tadi, tempatnya radikal, kan biasanya kayak gitu muncul di berita-berita. Seakan-akan Solo itu tempatnya ekstrem, padahal kenyataannya tidak seperti itu semua. Tapi ya memang kenyataannya juga banyak pesantren yang keras juga, ya ada.*

Another informant from the local interfaith forum added:

"*Iya, stigma-stigma semacam itu susah hilangnya. Kalau udah dicap, susah. Tapi kita pelan-pelan coba ubah image Solo. Nggak semua orang sini radikal kok.*

These accounts suggest that the image of Solo as a hotspot for radicalism not only stems from actual events but is also shaped by media portrayal and collective memory, influencing how the city is perceived and how its citizens attempt to reconstruct its narrative.

The Emergence of New Symbols and Narratives

In the last decade, Solo has undergone a significant identity transformation, marked by systematic efforts from local actors, the community, and the government to change the city's image, which was once known as the epicenter of radicalism. This transformation has been more focused on cultivating a new image that highlights moderate Islam, tolerance, and diversity, driven by several factors, one of which was the construction of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in 2021.

The Construction of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque

The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque has become a significant symbol in the transformation of Solo's identity. This mosque, a gift from the United Arab Emirates, was built with the purpose of strengthening bilateral relations between Indonesia and the UAE, but its impact extends far beyond political diplomacy. It functions as a project of religious diplomacy, presenting an image of peaceful and moderate Islam, while also making a substantial contribution to Solo's image as a friendly, inclusive, and open city that embraces diversity.

The Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque serves not only as a place of worship but also as a symbol of religious harmony in Solo. Additionally, the mosque reflects Solo's ability to adapt to the times while preserving its traditional roots. The mosque's construction also marks a turning point in building a new image for a city that has often been associated with radicalization. With this magnificent mosque, Solo is now recognized as a city that embodies moderate Islam, which is more tolerant and open to various social and cultural changes.

As a symbol of international relations, the mosque also carries a message about the importance of cooperation between countries in promoting peace and tolerance. By highlighting religious diplomacy, the mosque sends a powerful message to the world that Solo is committed to upholding peaceful values in all aspects of its social life, thus strengthening Indonesia s image as a country with a tradition of moderate Islam.

Public Spaces and Interfaith Activities

In addition to the symbolic construction of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, another effort that strengthens the narrative of Solo's identity transformation is the utilization of public spaces, such as Gladak and the Surakarta City Hall, as centers for interfaith cultural expression. These public spaces have increasingly been used to host various events that involve many elements of society from different religious and cultural backgrounds. The organization of interfaith events in these public spaces creates an inclusive atmosphere, where various religious and cultural groups can interact, discuss, and share experiences in a mutually respectful and tolerant environment. Activities such as cultural festivals, interfaith dialogues, and joint religious celebrations have become key platforms in strengthening religious harmony in Solo.

The Politics of Symbolic Representation

The transformation of Solo's identity, emphasizing moderate Islam and religious harmony, is closely linked to the important role of symbolic representation politics, which aims to modify how society

perceives and understands the city's identity. Symbolic representation politics refers to the ways in which certain symbols are used to shape, alter, or reconstruct public perceptions of a place or social group. In the context of Solo, symbols such as the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, public spaces open to all religions, and various interfaith events function as tools to introduce and reinforce the city's new, more moderate and inclusive identity.

According to McKinley and Jung, these symbols play a crucial role in creating a social narrative that leads to the normalization of values such as peace and tolerance. By effectively utilizing these symbols, Solo has successfully shaped its image as a city that is not only safe and welcoming but also one that embraces diversity as a strength. These symbols have become powerful tools in building trust among religious communities and reinforcing the spirit of togetherness among Solo's residents, both locally and globally.

Impact and Implications of Identity Transformation

The transformation of Solo's identity has had a significant impact on the public's understanding of moderate Islam and interfaith harmony. By making symbols such as the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque and interfaith events part of its public representation, Solo has created a social space where religious diversity is seen as something valuable and worthy of respect. This represents a crucial step in changing the public perception of Solo from a city once associated with the potential for radicalization to one with an identity as a model of diversity and tolerance.

The Role of Local Actors in Constructing Moderation

The social transformation in Solo did not occur naturally but was socially constructed through the strategic roles of key local actors. This aligns with the framework of social constructivism, which emphasizes that reality and meaning are not inherently given, but are continuously produced and reproduced through social interaction and interpretation. In Solo, various actors collaboratively shaped new meanings of Islam and urban identity by reconstructing the city's public narrative, from being seen as a center of radicalism to becoming a symbol of moderation and tolerance. Among these key actors, two major religious organizations in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have played a central role in shaping the new narrative of moderate Islam and bridging religious discourse with social realities at the local level. Both organizations hold broad influence in Solo and have played an important balancing role in addressing the challenges of radicalization in the region.

Muhammadiyah and NU consistently disseminate messages of moderation (wasathiyah), tolerance, and contextual religious interpretations through education, da′wah (preaching), and community empowerment. Muhammadiyah, for example, promotes social justice and moderation through its educational institutions by integrating spiritual and social dimensions. Meanwhile, NU instills tolerance and interfaith harmony through its pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). Their activities not only operate within religious contexts but also span across social, political, and cultural spheres, fostering mutual respect and inclusive values in society.

In addition to the important roles of these religious organizations, the Solo city government also plays a significant part in this transformation process. The local government not only acts as a regulator and supervisor but also as a key driver in creating spaces for constructive and understanding interfaith dialogue. One important initiative the government has undertaken is supporting projects that promote inclusivity and tolerance, such as the Festival of Religious Harmony. This festival serves as a platform to celebrate religious and cultural diversity in Solo while reinforcing the narrative of interfaith harmony and cooperation. Furthermore, the city government collaborates with international institutions to promote peaceful Islam, aiming to introduce Solo as an example of a city that thrives in diversity and upholds the principles of tolerance in religious life.

Local media serve as another vital actor by shifting the public narrative. While media coverage once spotlighted Solo as a hub of radicalism, it has increasingly highlighted the city′s transformation into a space of diversity and interreligious tolerance. This narrative shift is evident in media reports that promote positive community efforts supporting inclusivity and social harmony.

Collectively, the roles of Muhammadiyah, NU, the city government, and local media represent intersubjective processes of meaning negotiation and identity formation. Through repeated social interaction, symbolic representation, and public endorsement, the actors reconstructed Solo s image into a pluralistic and tolerant city. This aligns with the social constructivist view that identities religious or urban are not static but are actively produced and stabilized through interaction, interpretation, and institutional support.

In sum, the transformation of Solo into a city that promotes religious moderation is not merely a result of policy or ideology but a socially constructed reality shaped by dynamic interaction among key local actors. These actors not only challenged existing narratives but also institutionalized new values that continue to inform how the city understands itself and is understood by others.

The Reconstruction of the City's Identity within the Framework of Social Constructivism

The identity transformation in Solo exemplifies the core tenets of social constructivism, a theoretical framework that posits social realities including religious identities are not objectively given or determined by fixed external factors, but are continuously shaped, produced, and reproduced through social interactions, discourses, narratives, and symbolic processes. This perspective helps explain how Solo has shifted its image from being associated with radical Islamic movements to being recognized as a city that promotes moderate Islam and religious tolerance. The emergence of this new identity is the result of an active and dynamic process involving various social actors, religious discourses, and institutional structures that interact and influence each other in shaping a more inclusive and peaceful urban narrative.

This identity construction process occurs dynamically through symbolic strategies, namely the use of symbols and symbolic actions that shape the public's perception of an identity. For instance, in Solo s case, the use of religious symbols representing peaceful and moderate Islam, such as interfaith events, religious harmony festivals, or educational programs emphasizing tolerance and equality among religious communities, plays a crucial role in creating a positive image of the city. Policy engineering by the city government has also supported this change. Through policies promoting inclusivity and creating spaces for interfaith dialogue, the government has laid a solid foundation for the creation of a new, more moderate city identity. Additionally, the consolidation of social actors, including religious organizations like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), as well as local media, has been instrumental in strengthening the growing narrative of diversity and moderation in Solo.

More importantly, this identity transformation process shows that the dark history that once shaped Solo's image as a hotbed of radicalism is no longer an absolute determinant in shaping the city's identity. Although Solo has a long history filled with ethnic tensions and religious conflicts, particularly related to radical groups like Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), the city has successfully redefined its public image through the collective efforts of various social actors and policies that support the development of a new, more inclusive identity. With strong symbolic strategies, such as holding large-scale events involving all levels of society and religions, as well as policies that emphasize the importance of coexistence in diversity, Solo has demonstrated that a city's dark history does not have to determine its future. On the contrary, through social consolidation and narrative engineering, Solo has successfully changed perceptions and created a new, more positive identity.

Solo, once known as a city with high potential for religion-based conflict, now stands as a model city with tolerant, moderate Islam that is adaptive to modernity. This is not only reflected in public discourse but also in concrete actions that can be seen in the city's social and cultural life. Through educational programs that teach the importance of tolerance and harmony, as well as government policies that support diversity, Solo is now recognized as a city capable of countering the potential for radicalization while upholding values of moderation and peace. Over time, Solo has not only successfully overcome the major challenges related to radicalization but has also positioned itself as an example of a city that can adapt to changing times without losing its moderate religious roots. The

moderate Islam that has become the city's identity is not just a discourse but a living reality manifested in a more peaceful and inclusive social life.

Conclusion

This study finds that the transformation of Solo s religious identity from a center of radicalism to a city representing moderate Islam is the outcome of a multi-layered social construction process. Empirical evidence shows that this change was not linear or abrupt, but rather emerged through the interplay of various symbolic strategies, the deployment of inclusive narratives, and coordinated interventions by key actors at the local level.

Religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), along with community leaders and local government officials, played an instrumental role in redefining religious practices and fostering tolerance. Their actions went beyond religious preaching, encompassing social engagement, educational efforts, and policy advocacy that encouraged reinterpretations of Islam aligned with pluralist values.

A central pattern identified in this transformation was the use of religious symbols most notably the construction of the Sheikh Zayed Mosque and the orchestration of interfaith events. These symbols were deliberately positioned to communicate openness, harmony, and inclusivity. Such efforts were crucial in reshaping public perceptions and rebranding the city s religious image.

In parallel, the promotion of an inclusive cultural narrative became a key mechanism through which local actors instilled values of peaceful coexistence. Through communal activities involving diverse religious groups, Solo reinforced intergroup solidarity and mitigated historical tensions.

In sum, the transformation of Solo s religious identity was made possible through a combination of symbolic reengineering, participatory governance, and strategic mobilization of religious discourse. These findings demonstrate that religious moderation is not an abstract ideal but a tangible process that can be realized through deliberate social and political practices. Solo thus offers a replicable model for cities confronting similar issues of religious extremism and social fragmentation.

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