Analysis of Muslim Community's Perception of the Establishment of Non-Muslim Houses of Worship: A Qualitative Study

Milda Apriliana*
Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia
aprilianamilda28@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines Muslim community perceptions of the establishment of non-Muslim places of worship in Bangkala District, Jeneponto Regency. Existing studies have largely focused on regulatory frameworks or interreligious conflict in pluralistic societies, while limited attention has been given to perceptions within socially and religiously homogeneous Muslim-majority communities. Addressing this gap, the study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations involving local government officials, religious leaders, youth leaders, Muslim residents, and non-Muslim residents. Secondary data were obtained from academic literature, legal regulations, and relevant official documents. Data were analyzed through thematic reduction, categorization, synthesis, and interpretation. The findings indicate that Muslim perceptions are shaped by religious identity, local cultural values, concerns over social change, the proposed location of places of worship, and the intensity of non-Muslim religious activities. Community attitudes tend to reflect conditional tolerance, whereby acceptance is granted provided that legal and administrative requirements are fulfilled, including verified documentation and community approval as stipulated by existing regulations. Theoretically, this study contributes to the discourse on religious tolerance by demonstrating that acceptance in Muslim-majority contexts is not solely grounded in normative religious principles but is also influenced by social negotiation and regulatory compliance. From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the importance of participatory dialogue, tolerance-oriented education, and consistent regulatory enforcement in managing interreligious harmony at the local level.

Keywords: *Public Perception, Non-Muslim Houses of Worship, Religious Tolerance*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country with a high level of diversity, including religion, ethnicity, language, and culture, spread across various regions. This diversity is a national treasure, but it also has the potential to cause social friction if not managed properly (Putrie & Maslucha, 2012). One of the issues that is often sensitive is the construction of houses of worship, especially for minority groups living in areas dominated by certain religions. Houses of worship serve not only as places for religious rituals but also as symbols of identity, spaces for social interaction, and markers of community presence in society (Prasetiawati, 2020). Therefore, his attitude often provokes mixed social reactions.

Cultural and religious diversity is an unavoidable reality, as every individual and group must have differences and similarities. Plurality of cultures, traditions, and beliefs is also a

wealth that enriches the Indonesian nation. (Nurzalinda et al., 2025). However, without understanding accompanied by an attitude of tolerance and mutual respect, this diversity can trigger conflicts and even violent acts.

In an effort to manage diversity, the government encourages the strengthening of religious moderation as a strategy to build a harmonious and inclusive society. Religious moderation emphasizes the importance of being fair, tolerant, respectful of differences, and avoiding acts of violence in practicing religious teachings (Rani et al., 2025). This approach is particularly relevant in areas with relatively religiously homogeneous population compositions, as minimal interreligious interactions often increase the tendency towards exclusivity. Findings Lestari & Ulfa (2025) This study shows that people's level of understanding of religious moderation affects their acceptance of symbols of other religious identities, including houses of worship. Therefore, the low understanding of the values of tolerance can trigger rejection of the establishment of houses of worship in a number of regions.

A number of previous studies in Indonesia have generally examined the issue of the establishment of houses of worship from the perspective of law, public policy, or inter-religious conflicts in multicultural and heterogeneous areas. However, studies that specifically examine the perception of Muslims in relatively homogeneous majority areas towards the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship are still limited. In fact, in this context, public perception is not only influenced by formal regulations, but also by social, cultural, and historical factors of the local community. This research is here to fill this gap.

These conflicts arise from the lack of clarity regarding the requirements and procedures for the establishment of houses of worship. Furthermore, there are still cases of misuse of residences or other buildings as places of worship without permission (Ardiansah, 2016). The establishment or presence of houses of worship that are not in accordance with applicable regulations and are not in line with the aspirations of the local community also trigger tension. Differences in local government regulations, some even do not have special regulations regarding the establishment of houses of worship, further exacerbate the potential for conflict. The lack of communication between religious leaders in a region further complicates the situation.

Although the government has established various regulations related to the establishment of houses of worship, in practice rejection and social tension still often occur, especially in areas with certain religious dominances. This shows that compliance with legal provisions does not necessarily guarantee social acceptance at the community level. The main problem lies in how the perception of Muslims as a majority group is formed towards the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship, especially in the context of a relatively socially and religiously homogeneous society.

According to the Statistics Agency (BPS) of Jeneponto Regency in 2024, the population of Bangkala Regency as one of the areas in Jeneponto Regency is dominated by Muslims. This dominance is not only seen in the number of adherents, but also in the culture and daily social activities of the community. In such a context, the existence of non-Muslim houses of worship is often a sensitive issue as it is related to social acceptance, symbolic boundaries, and public perceptions of diversity. Social life in society is relatively stable, and religious conflicts are rare. However, when plans to build houses of worship for non-Muslims emerged, the community showed a refusal response. It shows the social and psychological distance between the majority and minority groups (Wahab et al., 2024).

In addition, the establishment of houses of worship in Indonesia has been regulated through a Joint Ministerial Regulation (PBM) (Nos. 9 and 8, 1945) which contains provisions regarding administrative requirements, community support, and recommendations from the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB). However, in practice, the implementation of PBM in different regions often faces different interpretations, influencing social dynamics at the local level. This makes public perception a key factor in the success of the construction of houses of worship, especially in areas dominated by certain religions.

The response of the people of Jeneponto to the construction of non-Muslim houses of worship is inseparable from the socio-historical conditions of the community who have long been unaccustomed to coexisting with other religious communities. Theological factors, customs, and cultural values also contribute to the formation of public perceptions (R, 2021). This perception then affects the extent to which people can accept the presence of other groups socially and shape patterns of relationships and interactions between religious communities (Ajidin, 2020). There are concerns about the sociological impact of these cases, which could trigger prolonged horizontal conflicts. This can happen not only in Jeneponto district but also in other areas (Fahmi & Rohman, 2021). It is undesirable for these cases to reach followers of other religions (Christians), as they can trigger an emotional response from other religious groups, potentially leading to acts of retaliation or an exclusive attitude. For example, it prohibits Muslims from building places of worship (mosques) in areas where Muslims are a minority group.

Given this complexity, research on Muslim perceptions of the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship is essential. This understanding can help identify the factors that support and hinder social acceptance, as well as open up space for more constructive dialogue to foster interfaith harmony. Furthermore, the results of this research can be a reference for local governments in formulating more inclusive and targeted policies. Based on the background and gaps of the research, this study aims to analyze the perception of the Muslim community towards the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in Bangkala District, Jeneponto Regency. In addition, this study also aims to identify social, cultural, and regulatory factors that influence the formation of these perceptions.

METHODS

This research was carried out in Bangkala District, Jeneponto Regency, using a qualitative descriptive approach. This approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand the perceptions, views, and experiences of the community regarding the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in certain social and religious contexts. A qualitative approach allows researchers to capture social realities contextually based on empirical data in the field, rather than solely on theoretical testing.

Data Sources and Research Subjects

The data sources in this study consist of primary data and secondary data. Primary data is obtained directly from informants involved in the research, while secondary data is obtained from scientific literature, laws and regulations, official reports, and documents relevant to the research topic (Sulung & Muspawi, 2021).

The research subjects were determined using the purposive sampling technique, which is the deliberate selection of informants based on certain criteria relevant to the research objectives. The criteria for informants include: 1) having knowledge or experience related to

the issue of establishing houses of worship, 2) being directly involved or affected in socio-religious dynamics in Bangkala District, and willing to provide information openly.

Source selection uses sampling techniques by determining samples to be used as data sources by showing population characteristics and distribution in order to obtain a representative sample (Suriani et al., 2023). In this study, researchers interviewed several subjects, namely: local governments, religious leaders, youth leaders, Muslim communities and non-Muslim communities.

Data Collection Techniques

The data collection technique method is carried out through observation and in-depth interviews. Observations were carried out directly to observe social conditions, interaction between religious communities, and community responses to the issue of establishing non-Muslim houses of worship (Hasanah, 2017). Meanwhile, the interview was conducted in a semi-structured manner so that the researcher could explore the views, experiences, and perceptions of the informants in more depth, but still directed in accordance with the focus of the research (Rozalia, 2015). In addition, documentation is used as supporting data in the form of archives, regulations, and related records.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis technique is carried out in a qualitative thematic manner through several stages. First, the data from interviews and observations are transcribed and read repeatedly to understand the overall context. Second, the researcher conducts coding by grouping the data into main themes relevant to the focus of the research, such as religious perception, socio-cultural factors, and regulatory aspects. Third, the encoded data is analyzed thematically to find patterns, relationships, and meanings that emerge from the field data.

This stage of analysis includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn, which are done repeatedly and interrelated to produce in-depth understanding and inductive conclusions (Abdussamad, 2019). The analysis phase follows three main components: data reduction (selection and simplification of data according to the focus of the research), data presentation (systematic arrangement of information so that it is easy to understand), and conclusion drawing (the process of formulating meaning and verifying data). These three components are interconnected to produce in-depth understanding and inductive conclusions based on field data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Location at a Glance

Bangkala Regency consists of 5 coastal villages/sub-districts and 9 non-coastal villages/sub-districts with diverse topography and altitude, covering an area of 121.85 km². The population of Bangkala Regency is 61,696 people, spread across each village and sub-district. Bangkala is one of the 11 sub-districts in Jeneponto Regency, with the following administrative boundaries:

-Stuart   : Kabupaten Gowa
-East   : Distrik Tamalatea
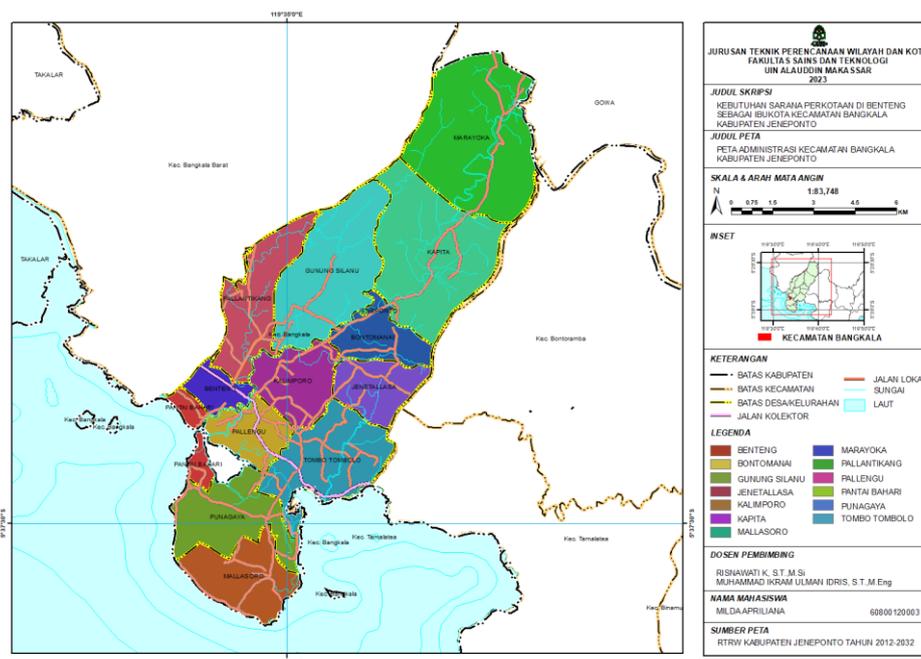-West   : West Bangkala Regency
-South   : According to Flores

Figure 1. Bangkala District Administration Map

Bangkala Regency is one of the oldest areas in Jeneponto Regency, boasting a strong socio-cultural history, especially in the development of Islam. Since the time of the kingdom in South Sulawesi, the Bangkala region has been under the influence of the Kingdom of Bangkala and later the Kingdom of Binamu, which is known as the center of the spread of Islam on the south coast (Hastira et al., 2025). The entry of Islam into this region occurred in the 16th to 17th centuries, following the process of Islamization brought by preachers, Bugis-Makassar traders, and a network of scholars from Gowa-Tallo (Hadrawi, 2017). Since then, the people of Bangkala have slowly abandoned their traditional pre-Islamic beliefs and begun to adopt Islamic teachings widely.

The development of Islam in Bangkala is getting stronger with the establishment of religious institutions such as mosques, prayer rooms, and local Islamic boarding schools which have become the center of religious development in the community (Rahman, 2020). Over time, religious activities have become an important part of people's social life, forming a strong and homogeneous religious identity. Traditions such as religious study groups, religious study groups, Prophet's Birthday celebrations, and community-based religious activities have taken root and become a hallmark of local culture.

Until now, Bangkala Regency is still dominated by Muslims who make up almost the entire population (BPS Bangkala District, 2024). This situation results in the social structure of society being greatly influenced by Islamic values and customs that are in harmony with religious teachings. The presence of other religious groups is very limited, so interreligious interaction is minimal in the history of the region. The limited experience of people living side by side with adherents of other religions has also shaped their perceptions of non-Muslim religious symbols, including plans to build houses of worship.

This strong religious identity is one of the factors that affect the dynamics of public acceptance of minority communities. In the modern context, this situation can pose challenges, especially when problems arise related to the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship, which are often seen as new or inconsistent with the socio-historical conditions of the Bangkala region.

The Condition of the Muslim Community Before the Construction of Non-Muslim Houses of Worship in Bangkala District, Jeneponto Regency

Before the plan to build non-Muslim places of worship appeared, the Muslim community in Bangkala District lived in a socially and religiously stable environment, homogeneous, strongly influenced by Islamic values. Community activities are mostly centered around mosques, religious study groups (majlis taklim), Qur'an readings, and other routine religious activities. This situation accustomed people to living in a uniform belief environment, so that interaction with followers of other religions almost never occurred. This depiction actually reflects the general situation of Jeneponto Regency, where before 2009 there were no non-Muslim settlements and there were never any religion-based conflicts. The Islamic identity of the community is so strong, coupled with the absence of other places of worship other than mosques, that social dynamics are revealed without the problem of religious diversity.

The change only began to be felt when non-Muslims began to arrive and settle in Jeneponto around 2009, mainly due to the transfer of jobs such as civil servants, police officers, and workers from other areas. Their presence introduces a form of diversity that was previously unknown to the local community. Some residents were able to accept the change, but others, especially in rural areas, expressed objections because they were not used to the presence of adherents of other religions. However, over time, society adapted and continued to allow non-Muslim residents to practice their worship privately at home, as long as it did not involve the construction of new places of worship, which were considered to have the potential to trigger greater social dynamics.

Interviews with informants reinforce this portrayal: "Before there were non-Muslim places of worship, people lived in harmony as usual. There is no problem, but some people are not used to diversity, so concerns arise when new construction emerges." (Agussalim, Interview, 2025).

This is in line with the second respondent's statement: "Previously, people lived normally, with no noticeable differences regarding places of worship." (Ismi, Interview, 2025).

This statement shows that society does not have significant experience in dealing with religious differences. Sunita Sri Wahyuni (Nurse) also emphasized that there was never a problem regarding the existence of a place of worship before the construction problem arose: "There is no conflict among the community regarding the construction of non-Muslim places of worship." (Sunita Sri Wahyuni, Interview, 2025).

This shows that social conditions are peaceful and stable. Meanwhile, to describe the condition of the community: "The community is generally calm and there is no conflict, as there has been no issue of prominent religious differences." (Adel, Interview, 2025).

Furthermore, Nurul Faidah (KUA Staff) added that the presence of places of worship of other religions is unprecedented, so this issue encourages social adjustment in society: "Plans for the construction of places of worship for other religions are often the starting point for dialogue and social adjustment because there has been no direct experience of living with other religions before." (Nurul Faidah, Interview, 2025).

Based on the overall findings of the interview, it can be concluded that before the plan to build non-Muslim places of worship appeared, the Muslim community in Bangkala District lived in a socially and religiously stable, harmonious, and homogeneous environment. The limited experience in dealing with diversity made the community respond cautiously when

the issue of building non-Muslim places of worship began to arise. Therefore, the strong homogeneity background and uneven literacy related to diversity are the main factors that shape the initial perception of the community towards planned development.

These findings suggest that strong religious homogeneity forms a stable pattern of social interaction, but at the same time limits people's experiences in dealing with diversity. This condition is in line with the view of Berger and Luckmann (1991) that social reality is formed through repetitive habits and collective experiences. When the social reality of the people of Bangkala for many years was built in a uniform religious environment, psychological resistance arose when faced with new religious symbols. Thus, the prudence of society does not merely reflect intolerance, but rather the limitations of social experience in the context of religious pluralism.

Perception of the Muslim Community Before the Construction of Non-Muslim Houses of Worship in Bangkala District, Jeneponto Regency

The perception of the people of Jeneponto towards the construction of non-Muslim places of worship is influenced by the fact that the majority of the population is Muslim and has strong religious traditions. The Muslim community tends not to interfere in the affairs of other religions, but they are still aware of the existence of non-Muslim places of worship in their neighborhood. An informant stated: "The majority of the Jeneponto community is Muslim and religious. We don't want to interfere with other religions, but we still observe if non-Muslims carry out worship activities in our area." (Tajuddin, Interview, 2025).

Factors that contribute to the rejection of non-Muslim places of worship in this area include:

1. Local religious sovereignty: The Jeneponto community wants to maintain Islamic dominance in the region and feels the need to preserve its long-standing cultural identity and traditions.
2. Concerns about social and cultural change: There are concerns that the presence of non-Muslim places of worship could affect traditional values and social norms.
3. Location and distance from the city center: Places of worship that are built in a strategic location and are highly visible are more appealing to residents, while locations farther away from the city center are more acceptable.
4. Intensity and routine of worship: People tend to accept the presence of non-Muslims during worship in person at home, but suspicion arises when worship is performed regularly in a fixed location.
5. Non-Muslim resident status: Non-Muslims who live temporarily, such as civil servants, military personnel, or police officers, are more readily accepted than those who settle permanently and establish places of worship.

Another informant added that permission to worship was granted on the condition that religious activities were carried out privately at home and not as an official place of worship:

"We don't mind as long as they worship in their own homes. If they want to create a permanent place of worship, that's when the community starts to consider the impact." (Megawati, Interview, 2025).

Over time, when non-Muslims began to regularly use one location for worship, the community began to pay more attention and become curious:

"Initially, we thought of their house as just an ordinary place to live. But since they worship there regularly, we started asking questions and observing." (Dwinto Octa, Interview, 2025).

Thus, the people of Jeneponto show a tolerant but selective attitude: they continue to provide space for non-Muslims to worship, as long as these activities do not interfere with the daily lives of the citizens and do not turn into conspicuous permanent places of worship. This attitude reflects a balance between respecting religious freedom and maintaining the socio-religious identity of the local community.

The public's selective perception of the construction of non-Muslim places of worship shows that there is a negotiation between the value of tolerance and the protection of socio-religious identity. These findings are relevant to Azra's (2019) research which states that tolerance in the majority Muslim society is often contextual and conditional. In the context of Bangkala, tolerance is accepted as long as religious activities do not turn into permanent symbols that are considered to disturb social balance. This confirms that public perception is more influenced by socio-cultural aspects than theological rejection of other religions.

Discussion

Muslim Majority Perception in the Context of a Homogeneous Society

The results of the study show that the Muslim community in Bangkala District lived in a relatively homogeneous social and religious environment before the emergence of plans to build non-Muslim houses of worship. This homogeneity forms a pattern of social interaction that is stable, harmonious, and minimal in conflict, because people are used to interacting within a uniform framework of religious values and symbols. Islamic identity functions not only as a personal belief, but also as a collective identity that regulates social, cultural, and social norms.

This condition has implications for the limited experience of the community in dealing with religious differences directly. As social realities over the years were built in a uniform religious environment, the presence of new religious symbols such as the plan to establish non-Muslim houses of worship was perceived as something alien. This situation is in line with the social construction theory of Berger and Luckmann (1991) which states that social reality is formed through collective habits and experiences that are constantly reproduced. Therefore, the prudence of the people of Bangkala is more appropriately understood as an adaptive response to social change, rather than as an ideological rejection of diversity.

The findings of the interviews show that before the issue of building non-Muslim houses of worship arose, the community lived in peaceful conditions without religion-based conflicts. However, the limitations of diversity literacy and the lack of interfaith interaction form an initial perception full of caution. Thus, the perception of the majority of Muslims in Bangkala reflects efforts to maintain social stability and collective identity in the midst of the social changes they have just experienced.

Regulation on the Establishment of Houses of Worship Between Legal Compliance and Social Harmony

The results of the study show that the perception of the Muslim community towards the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship is inseparable from their understanding of the applicable regulations, especially the Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religion and the Minister of Home Affairs on the establishment of houses of worship. The regulation is

seen as a formal mechanism to maintain social order and prevent conflicts between religious communities. In the context of Bangkala, compliance with administrative provisions and community support are the main prerequisites for social acceptance.

However, field findings also show that the implementation of regulations is not always purely normative, but is negotiated in daily social practices. People tend to accept the existence of non-Muslims as long as religious activities are carried out privately and are not manifested in the form of permanent symbols. When worship activities begin to be centralized and have the potential to become official houses of worship, regulations are then used as the main reference to assess their legitimacy and social impact.

This condition shows the tension between legal compliance and social harmony. On the one hand, regulation functions as a tool of formal legitimacy; On the other hand, social acceptance remains strongly influenced by cultural values, concerns about social change, and the collective perception of society. These findings reinforce the view that the successful implementation of regulations on the establishment of houses of worship is determined not only by legal aspects, but also by sensitivity to local social and cultural contexts. Thus, regulations need to be understood as instruments of social dialogue, not just administrative rules.

Strategies for Building Social Harmony

Based on these empirical findings, efforts to solve the problem of the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship need to be understood as a social process that involves dialogue, education, and law enforcement in a balanced manner.

1. Socialization and Education of Religious Tolerance. The local government, together with religious leaders and community leaders, needs to conduct a socialization program about the importance of tolerance and the right to worship for all believers. Such activities may include public discussions, seminars, or community events that emphasize that the construction of non-Muslim places of worship does not diminish the identity of the Muslim majority in Jeneponto.

2. Open Dialogue between Muslim and Non-Muslim Communities Direct dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim residents who want to have a place of worship can reduce suspicion and concern. In this dialogue, all parties can agree on the location, frequency of worship, and common rules.

3. Implementation of Legal Provisions (Regulation of the Minister of Religion)The establishment of non-Muslim places of worship is allowed as long as it meets the requirements of the regulation, namely: a list of non-Muslim residents who will use the place of worship and support from at least 60 Muslim residents from the surrounding areas as a form of social acceptance.

Interviews with non-Muslim residents show that they are willing to abide by this requirement: "We want to have a decent and permanent place of worship. We are ready to follow the rules, including getting support from Muslim citizens, so that the development can be accepted by all parties." (Ismi, Interview, 2025).

4. Strategic Location SelectionChoosing a location that is not too close to the center of community activities or densely populated areas can minimize the potential for conflict. Locations in temporary employee settlements or areas far from the city center are more acceptable to Muslims.

5. Periodic Guidance and MonitoringAfter the place of worship is built, the government or community leaders need to conduct periodic monitoring to ensure that worship activities remain in accordance with the agreement and do not create new tensions.

6. Increasing Joint Social ActivitiesOrganizing joint social activities, such as community service, mutual cooperation, or humanitarian activities, can strengthen relationships between communities and foster mutual respect.

7. Non-Muslim Readiness to Obey the Rules and Respect the EnvironmentThe interview confirms that non-Muslims are willing to abide by legal and social regulations, including gaining the support of at least 60 Muslim residents, and worship in an orderly manner before official places of worship are established: "We respect the Muslim community. As long as we follow the rules and have the support of the residents, building a place of worship is not a problem. We just want a decent and comfortable place to worship." (Ardesi, Interview, 2025).

By implementing this solution, the construction of non-Muslim places of worship can proceed in an orderly, peaceful, and legal manner while respecting the identity of the Muslim majority in Jeneponto and guaranteeing the religious rights of non-Muslims.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the perception of the Muslim community towards the establishment of non-Muslim houses of worship in Bangkala District, Jeneponto Regency, is shaped by homogeneous socio-religious conditions and limited experience in dealing with religious diversity. Before the emergence of plans to build non-Muslim houses of worship, people lived in a stable, harmonious environment, and dominated by Islamic religious practices and symbols. This social homogeneity creates social stability, but at the same time limits the readiness of the community to respond to changes related to the presence of new religious symbols.

The empirical findings of this study show that the Muslim community does not fundamentally reject the existence of non-Muslims, but shows a tolerant attitude that is selective. Tolerance is given as long as worship activities are carried out privately and are not manifested in the form of permanent places of worship that stand out in public spaces. The community's concerns are more influenced by socio-cultural aspects, such as potential changes in local identity, development locations, intensity of worship activities, and non-Muslim population status, rather than by theological differences. This emphasizes that public perception is the result of negotiations between the value of tolerance and efforts to maintain social stability.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the study of religious tolerance by showing that the cautious attitude of the Muslim-majority society does not necessarily reflect intolerance, but rather the limitations of social experience in the context of religious pluralism. These findings enrich the understanding that tolerance in homogeneous societies is contextual and influenced by long-established social constructs. Empirically, this study provides an in-depth picture of the dynamics of Muslim perceptions in Muslim-majority areas that have been relatively rarely studied in previous research.

From a policy perspective, this study emphasizes the importance of a non-purely normative approach in the implementation of regulations for the establishment of houses of worship. Local governments and stakeholders need to integrate legal compliance with socio-cultural approaches through participatory dialogue, socialization of religious tolerance, and

active involvement of religious leaders and communities. The regulation of the establishment of houses of worship should be positioned as an instrument to build social harmony, not just an administrative requirement.

This study recommends that policymakers strengthen religious moderation education programs in certain religiously majority areas and ensure the implementation of regulations that are sensitive to local contexts. For further research, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies between regions with different levels of homogeneity or use a longitudinal approach to see changes in public perception as interfaith interactions increase. Thus, efforts to build harmony between religious communities can be based on a more comprehensive and sustainable empirical understanding.

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