

The Role of Islamic Religious Counselors in Strengthening Religious Moderation in Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia



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ABSTRACT: Indonesia's vast population diversity includes various ethnicities, tribes, customs, cultures, languages, and religions. Religious moderation is a crucial agenda for every citizen to achieve peaceful coexistence among religious communities. As a fundamental value of every religion, strengthening moderation is a program to foster moderate attitudes and thinking in society. This research aims to explore the reinforcement of religious moderation values through the role of Islamic religious counselors in the Office of Religious Affairs in Mandailing Natal Regency. This research utilizes descriptive qualitative research, specifically field research, which collects data from the field. Data collection methods include interviews with 16 Islamic religious counselors, four heads of the Office of Religious Affairs, and one officer in charge of Zakat and Waqf management. Observations were conducted at 4 locations to observe Islamic religious counselors' routine religious guidance activities. Other data sources were obtained from relevant documents. Data were analyzed inductively through data reduction, classification, presentation, analysis, and conclusion. The results of this study indicate that Islamic religious counselors play a strategic role in strengthening religious moderation in the Mandailing Natal Regency. They are essential in strengthening the understanding of religious moderation among the community through guidance and counseling activities. The materials counselors deliver in guidance and counseling activities include worship and transactions, teaching good social life, understanding of wasatiyyah or balance, and practicing religious teachings correctly. Religious counselors play roles as informative and educational, consultative, advocative, mediative, and facilitative. Informative and educational roles dominate their role in strengthening religious moderation and instilling religious moderation values to realize a moderate society. Counselors play a strategic role through routine religious gatherings, Friday sermons, the guidance of study circles, large-scale religious gatherings, religious activities in correctional institutions, content creation on social media, and nurturing religiously moderate villages. This study recommends further research to measure public interest in religious moderation from different perspectives.

KEYWORDS: Role of Counselors, Islamic Religious Counselors, Strengthening Religious Moderation, Moderate Society

INTRODUCTION

For Indonesians, diversity is the will of God the Creator. Diversity is a gift from God, who provides nature with all its contents. With many ethnicities, tribes, customs, cultures, religions, and languages, Indonesia can hardly be compared with other countries. Diversity is illustrated by the diversity of religions, ethnicities, races, and groups from Sabang to Merauke (Liliweri, 2009).

A plural and multicultural nation, Indonesia has proved to the world its success in creating a harmonious life amid a diverse society. The presence of Islam in the archipelago does not have a mission to torment the existing culture. Religion has a vital role as an adhesive for national unity. Multiculturalism is the thinking that refers to the understanding that people do not live in one religion and culture (Ropi, 2019).

The diversity of the Indonesian nation cannot be denied with a variety of beliefs, views, opinions, and interests of each member of society, as well as religious practices (Munhanif & Ihsan, 2023). Fortunately, Indonesian people have a common language, allowing various beliefs to be communicated. The cultural condition of the Indonesian nation is so plural; on the one hand, it is seen as a national wealth that can be proud of in the international world, but on the other hand, the plurality can be seen as triggering great potential for conflict (Abubakar & Hemay, 2020; Masri, 2020).

Moving on from the case on July 9, 2017, a case was found in Mandailing Natal Regency with someone putting a pig's head in front of the Mushalla in Simpang Bambu Hamlet, Sundutan Tigo Village, Natal District. This incident suddenly triggered conflict and strong protests from the Muslim community there. (BS04, 2017).

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There was a case of community rioting against a cult recitation in Rumbio village, Panyabungan Utara sub-district, on February 25, 2020. The recitation found heretical teachings such as prayer orders are not required; they are guaranteed to enter heaven, do not require the pilgrimage, and in the pillars of faith, they believe that doomsday does not exist. With teachings like this, the community was furious, which led to clashes and the burning of the house where the heretical teachings were taught (Redaksi, 2020).

A shocking thing happened on March 02, 2021, which contained sentences and posts insulting Islamic boarding schools and Islamic boarding school teachers and insulting one of the religions in Indonesia through Rizky Hardiansyah's Facebook account (Redaksi, 2021). In addition, the Regent of Mandailing Natal H. M. Jafar Sukhairi Nasution, at the inauguration of the Madina Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) board, asked the board to be a counterweight to present positive information on social media because, according to him, regional heads have been regularly reviled and bullied. This will trigger social and political conflicts (Dianto, 2022b, 2022a). He hopes that religious leaders and adherents of their respective religions will create an atmosphere of harmony and peace in the community.

Observing the socio-religious phenomena that exist in society, especially Muslims, we often find a group of people throwing accusations of infidelity. Among Muslims, some groups like to judge, instill hatred, and commit acts of violence against other groups with accusations of heresy, infidels, liberals, and other accusations. The attitude of easily disbelieving others is a narrow religious perspective, group fanaticism, poor insight, and exclusive religious education. The attitude of disbelief is contrary to the nature of Islam, which emphasizes compassion, good manners, politeness, tawassuth, and tolerance.

From some of the above reviews, it is necessary to understand religion for its adherents. Therefore, to avoid significant turmoil, it is necessary to understand fellow citizens and the importance of respecting differences with the concept of religious moderation, which aims to understand each other. However, tensions and misunderstandings between residents mainly arise from misunderstandings in practicing religious teachings correctly and mistakes in managing diversity. Counselors conduct guidance activities to increase understanding of religious moderation. The instructor plays an active role, from the learning stage to providing solutions to the congregation's problems. An instructor called a jury dakwah, must be able to practice good communication with the community and intensive interpersonal communication with citizens through advice.

Counselors use communication methods to assess the conditions of residents at risk of conflict and carry out the communication process at the consultation and mediation stage. In this process, counseling uses a model that offers more choices and enlightenment on the topics discussed. Reciprocal communication facilitates relationships, mutual understanding, and practical cooperation (Triningtyas, 2016).

Islamic religious instructors must be competent and have various knowledge and skills that must be qualified and professional. The role of Islamic religious instructors in society as advisors, mentors, legal aid providers, motivation, and education that can direct and train community members to provide education and solutions to their various problems. Each extension activity must be supported by suitable communication methods and roles to support the task program of Islamic religious instructors. The main task of religious instructors is to guide people in conveying religious teachings and development ideas to the community using religious language.

Islamic religious instructors assigned to the Office of Religious Affairs are an extension of the government of the Ministry of Religion and have a strategic task and role in guiding the community. The role of religious instructors is very strategic in conveying development through the language of religion, primarily through participation in realizing inter-religious harmony, among other things, through the duties and functions of religious instructors, namely informative, consultative, and advocative functions (Amirulloh, 2017).

Religious Counselors of the Ministry of Religion of Mandailing Natal Regency have 186 (one hundred eighty-six) people. There are 176 (one hundred seventy-six) Islamic and 10 (ten) Christian religious instructors. Civil servant instructors are only 4 (four) people, and others are still non-civil servants. All extension workers are spread across 23 sub-districts in Mandailing Natal Regency. Each sub-district has an average of 8 (eight) instructors ready to assist the Ministry of Religious Affairs government program that directly touches the community in providing guidance and counseling services.

Islamic religious instructors, as in the previous regulation, focus on 8 (eight) areas of specialization. However, by the Decree of the Director General of Islamic Guidance Number 504 of 2022, there are 12 (twelve) specializations for Islamic religious instructors. The twelve specializations are as follows: Eradication of Qur'anic illiteracy; Sakinah family field; Zakat empowerment field; Waqf empowerment field; Economic empowerment field; Halal product field; Anti-corruption field; Religious moderation field; The field of religious harmony; Prevention of problematic religious movements and sects; Drug and HIV/AIDS prevention field; Hajj and Umrah field.

Moderation is a term that is quite familiar among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Many people understand moderation differently, depending on who approached it and in what context it was approached and understood. In simple terms, moderation can be interpreted as rejecting any form of extreme action or thought (Zainuddin, 2016).

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METHOD

This type of research is field research, which collects data from the field. The research subjects can be individuals, groups, and institutions. This research uses a qualitative approach, which is a descriptive analysis in the form of written or spoken words of observed behavior by describing the research subject (a person, institution, society, etc.) as it is. In this research, the author wants to see what roles and religious activities are carried out by Islamic religious instructors in strengthening religious moderation in the Mandailing Natal Regency.

The method used in this research is qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sugiyono, 2013). This study uses calculations, also called scientific research, with a natural data source character. According to Sukmadinata, this model research is conducted to describe or describe and analyze an event, phenomenon, social activity, attitude, perception, belief, or thought of a person, individually or in groups (Arikunto, 2005).

Qualitative research uses interview methods, observation, content analysis, and other data collection methods to present the responses and behavior of the subject (Patton, 2014). On the other hand, according to Arifin, Qualitative research is a scientific approach that reveals certain social situations by describing reality correctly formed by words based on relevant data analysis collection techniques obtained from natural situations (Maxwell, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The role of Islamic religious instructors in carrying out their duties is to guide the community to predetermined targets. Of course, this must be supported by the various roles of extension workers in guiding the community. Regarding strengthening religious moderation, the role of extension workers cannot be separated from the existing problems; some people with a lack of moderate understanding will be one of the triggers of conflict in social life.

Islamic religious instructors must provide counseling guidance two (two) times a week and be obligated to foster two (two) makes taklim by the village under the guidance of each instructor. Then, regarding performance reports, all instructors must report their weekly activities online at the link <https://epa.kemenag.go.id/>, which is integrated directly into the center and verified by the district admin.

The roles carried out by Islamic religious instructors in carrying out guidance and counseling include the following:

1. Informative and educative role

The role of Islamic religious instructors in strengthening religious moderation in the community of Mandailing Natal Regency is to deliver information sourced from Islamic teachings and information that must be conveyed from government programs, as well as provide the best Islamic religious education through the guidance of the Qur'an and Hadith.

The role of extension workers based on the results of interviews and observations with Mrs. Na'imah, she explained that extension workers who are mandated by the government of the Ministry of Religion have the responsibility of providing guidance and counseling to the community, as well as in terms of delivering government development programs, namely human character development. Lately, the government has continued to strive to socialize regarding religious moderation. So, to welcome this program, I, as an extension worker, have delivered it and socialized it to the community through Majelis Taklim. Providing an understanding of what religious moderation is and the purpose of religious moderation itself (Na'imah, Interview, 2023).

Sejalan dengan hal tersebut, Bapak Katino selaku penyuluh Agama Islam menyampaikan bahwa sebagai seorang penyuluh perannya di lapangan sungguh berat karena mengingat beragamanya pemahaman agama masyarakat yang ada. Setelah pemerintah mensosialisasikan moderasi beragama, penyuluh juga sudah menyampaikan materi tentang moderasi beragama di pengajian majelis taklim desa binaan masing-masing. Mengingat hal tersebut moderasi ini menjadi istilah baru di sebagian kalangan masyarakat, makanya penyuluh memberikan penjelasan, walaupun sebagian masyarakat kurang menyenangi materi tersebut, dan sebagiannya memang memahami pentingnya hidup rukun dan menerima perbedaan di tengah kemajemukan masyarakat (Katino, Interview, 2023).

Demikian halnya Kepala Kantor Urusan Agama Kecamatan Panyabungan Utara menyampaikan sebagai bahwa penyuluh yang ada di kantor ini semuanya berperan aktif dalam menyampaikan materi moderasi beragama di desa binaan masing-masing. Semua penyuluh dalam membina majelis taklim paling sedikit 2 (dua) majelis taklim perorang. Semua penyuluh sudah mengikuti pelatihan moderasi beragama. Maka dalam hal ini peran penyuluh dalam menyampaikan informasi dan sosialisasi terkait moderasi beragama sudah berjalan sejak lama. Mulai dari pemerintah pusat menginstruksikan supaya pemahaman moderasi beragama ini agar disosialisasikan kepada masyarakat luas (Pasaribu, Interview, 2023).

In line with this, Mr. Katino, as an Islamic religious instructor, said that as an instructor, his role in the field is challenging because of the diverse religious understanding of the existing community. After the government socialized religious moderation, the extension workers also delivered material about religious moderation in reciting the majlis taklim of their respective fostered villages. Given that this moderation is a new term in some circles of society, the extension workers explain that although some people do not like the material, some understand the importance of living in harmony and accepting differences amid community plurality.

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Likewise, the Head of the Religious Affairs Office of North Panyabungan Subdistrict said that the extension workers in this office all actively deliver religious moderation material in their respective fostered villages. All counselors in fostering majelis taklim at least 2 (two) majelis taklim per person. All counselors have attended religious moderation training. So, in this case, the role of extension workers in conveying information and socialization related to religious moderation has been running for a long time, starting from the central government instructing that this understanding of religious moderation should be socialized to the broader community (Yasir, Interview, 2023).

Based on the results of interviews and observations in the field, the role of an extension worker has been running well. The extension worker has carried out his duties and role as a provider of information and education to the community about strengthening religious moderation through their respective guidance. Counselors continue to provide guidance related to religious moderation as part of the task of extending the government.

However, according to the facts in the field, some extension workers have yet to be able to carry out their duties properly. Some instructors have yet to be able to deliver lectures in front of the congregation, only as accompaniment or as introductions/moderators.

2. Consultative Role

Extension workers are considered the best advisors who can provide solutions and an overview of the problems faced by the community. Through interviews and observations in the field, extension workers continue to synergize in receiving individual or group questions and consultations about developing religious understanding that blames each other. This is illustrated by Isnaini Burhanuddin, who explains that extension workers who provide guidance and counseling often receive consultations from the community regarding individual, family, and social problems. Sometimes, the congregation comes to consult after the recitation in the taklim assembly, and sometimes, they come spontaneously without further ado to directly convey the problems faced in the community. Seeing different understandings amid social life has caused doubt in some residents about what path to choose, so the counselor explains the problems faced so that there is no friction, misunderstanding, or trigger group fanaticism (Burhanuddin, Interview, 2023).

In line with this, Syarifuddin Lubis said that part of his duties as an instructor is to ask or consult the congregation who are still in doubt about religious understanding and then further explain the problems they receive. For example, there is an understanding that develops in the community that misleads each other, even confessing each other between fellow Muslims. In this case, the instructor explains his knowledge so that it becomes a reference and guidance material for the community to follow according to the teachings conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad Saw (Lubis, Interview, 2023).

Seeing the consulting role of Islamic religious instructors in carrying out their duties, an instructor can answer someone's questions to solve the religious development problems they face. When an instructor has a place to confide in the congregation, he will become a consultant called a counselor. Communication built by extension workers in the field must be able to master the situation and conditions that exist in diverse communities with understanding. Extension workers must also be equipped with knowledge and national insight to provide well-answered solutions to problems in the community.

3. Advocative Role

Extension activities are a process of interaction between the extension worker and the congregation. The instructor is also called a da'i who provides knowledge for the congregation of the fostered residents. In general, this communication pattern takes place with the aim that the activities of Islamic religious instructors can run well and smoothly. The role of advocacy is legal defense, or defense of the community from various threats, at least providing a view of the rule of law so that the community does not violate it. Given the very urgent role of counselors in providing guidance to the community and carrying out their function as advocates, the results of interviews with Khairul Anwar, the Islamic religious instructor, explained that the role of an instructor in carrying out his function as an advocate is to provide legal defense to the community from various threats to faith, worship, morals and various threats that destabilize the nation and state. In this case, the counselor continues to convey material on how a good Muslim has true faith, worship, and correct morals according to the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad Saw, and how to become a believer who obeys the state, who does not think and act anarchist or extreme. Many views have developed in the community that blame each other without considering the opinions of the scholars. Legally, things like this will threaten the stability of the nation and state (Katino, Interview, 2023).

According to the results of interviews in the field with the Islamic religious instructor Ahmad Sulaiman Zuhdi, the majelis taklim fostered in one village has two Islamic organizations. But geographically, the village population is pluralistic. There are different Islamic organizations, as well as residents of different religions, so in an advocative function as an extension worker explaining to the community their rights and obligations as good citizens must, of course, obey the existing rules, whether they come from the Al-Qur'an, Sunnah, Ijma' ulama or those that come from government regulations. Moreover, providing an understanding of religious moderation so that people live in harmony and the community can accept moderate understanding (Zuhdi, Interview, 2023).

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On the other hand, according to the results of interviews with Sayadi Nasution, Islamic religious instructors explained that religious instructors carry a significant mandate and responsibility. Sometimes, there needs to be more clarity of understanding in the community, not infrequently due to a statement or controversial policy of the central government that has severe consequences for the lower community. As a result of the controversy caused, the role of extension workers as the spearhead of the Ministry of Religion is at the forefront in explaining and providing information or clarification on the issue. Efforts like this require an extension worker to act as a defense of the law regarding society's problems (Nasution, Interview, 2023).

Based on the interview results, the advocacy function of extension workers, in particular, is usually the community's legal defense on legal issues faced. However, the advocacy role of an extension worker has yet to come to this. Still, the form of the advocacy function of the role of an extension worker, in this case, is a legal defense like preventing conflicts, providing an overview to the fostered community that understanding of state law so that both maintain and carry out the rules that exist in this country and carry out religious rules by their respective religious understanding. Thus, the community has a significant share in maintaining peace in social life.

4. Role of Mediation

Religious instructors have a vital role in providing guidance and counseling. Counselors also have a role in mediating people's problems, such as mediating the problem of divorce in the household. The role of religious instructors is to reduce the number of divorces that have been rampant lately, as well as other legal problems. Disputes and misunderstandings of the practice of religious teachings can cause division. Counselors appear as mediators for religious problems in society.

Based on an interview with an Islamic religious instructor, Katino explained: "There has been an incident that has become a valuable lesson for the community about teaching that is indicated as sinful, like the case in Rumbio village about tariqat which was indicated as heresy, so that in the end the community was provoked and there was a mass rampage against the leader of the tariqat in the field of the North Panyabungan Sub-District Office. Kua and extension workers mediated the problem at the North Panyabungan Sub-District Office. In addition, extension workers also have a mediation role in the community as an effort to prevent anarchist actions by delivering material at the majlis taklim fostered by extension workers in the village so that the community does not go the wrong way because extension workers, on the other hand, can function as legal information, if there are legal problems that violate up to the crime, there are law enforcement authorities who handle problems like this, and the community should not take the law into their own hands (Katino, Interview, 2023).

In line with this, Ahmad Sulaiman Zuhdi said we once held a religious moderation socialization event in Sibaruang village, Siabu sub-district. The socialization activity invited all religious and community leaders in the village and the sub-district government. In this case, there is a dialog, giving each other input and advice and accommodating aspirations between fellow citizens about what should be implemented and what efforts are made to stay away from actions that violate the law that can threaten harmony between religious communities. As the story goes, in the past, there was indeed a conflict between citizens of religious communities. Personal problems became a problem of friction between religious communities, resulting in conflict, but the incident was a long time ago and ended peacefully. Even so, we do not want to repeat the incident, and the most crucial task is maintaining harmony among people. The role of a counselor is undoubtedly one of mediation in preventing conflict and caring for and maintaining harmony among fellow citizens (Zuhdi, Interview, 2023).

Based on the interview results, low religious knowledge will cause conflict and the development of religious sects. The government, in this case, the counselor, plays a preventive role in maintaining relations between each other and religious communities; different beliefs remain in harmony, and no prolonged horizontal conflict can disrupt the stability of national unity and integrity. This role is vital to establishing good communication between religious leaders and the community because each is very influential in maintaining harmony.

5. Facilitation Role

Extension workers can help others interpret common goals and help them make plans so that goals can be achieved. Inviting the community to maintain harmony through the recitation of majlis taklim and grand recitation is one of the efforts to facilitate the people so that information and government policies can be adequately conveyed, as well as efforts to create a harmonious, peaceful, and prosperous life. They can help others interpret common goals and help them make plans so that goals can be achieved. Inviting the community to maintain harmony through the recitation of majlis taklim and grand recitation is one of the efforts to facilitate the people so that information and government policies can be adequately conveyed, as well as efforts to create a harmonious, peaceful, and prosperous life (Lubis, Interview, 2023).

The following is also the result of an interview with Ahmad Yasir, an Islamic religious instructor, explaining that the instructor invites the fostered residents to gather in one place, such as in schools, village halls, homes, and others. Then, through the recitation, the instructor gives the congregation taushiyah, views, and explanations on how a person should interact with villagers of different religions or their neighbors. If different religions know how to do business and how to interact, even in the teachings of Islam, a Muslim is told to do good to others. On the other hand, extension workers have also cooperated with the village community,

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cleaning the cemetery where the cemetery is mixed with Islamic and Christian cemeteries. The instructor facilitated the activity, communicating with the village government, religious leaders, and the younger generation. This included providing accommodation such as food and drinks to be enjoyed together. During the activity, there were no obstacles, and everything went well. This activity was not a one-time event, but the cooperation to clean up the village road continues to run well (Yasir, Interview, 2023).

Based on the interview results above, it can be understood that an extension worker's commitment to providing better religious services to the community is part of his duties and role. The presence of extension workers in the community providing spiritual guidance is precious. This is a clear example of how extension workers are present not only to provide religious teaching but also to be a positive driver in the practice of worship and muamalah in everyday life.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the researcher's study on the role of Islamic religious instructors in strengthening religious moderation in the Mandailing Natal district, the author concludes that religious instructors have several roles in strengthening religious moderation. Religious instructors act as informative and educative, consultative, advocative, mediators, and facilitators; among some of their roles, the informative and educative roles are dominant. Other roles are aimed at conflict prevention and strengthening religious moderation values to realize a moderate society. Counselors have a strategic role in several activities carried out through routine recitation and Friday sermons; coaching makes taklim, grand recitation, recitation in correctional institutions, making content on social media, and fostering moderation villages. Through activities such as this extension, workers have carried out their duties and roles well but need consistency and continue to improve their abilities to strengthen religious moderation. Based on the results of observations and interviews in the field, counselors still need to be more effective in carrying out their duties properly.

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