

Tolerance Education in Muslim Minority Educational Institutions in Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to analyze tolerance education policies and their integration into the curriculum of Islamic educational institutions in Muslim-minority areas: Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Hat Yai (Thailand), and Mentawai (Indonesia). Highlighting good practices in tolerance education is essential to strengthen Islamic education and counteract negative stigmas of Muslim minorities as intolerant or extremist.

Design/methods/approach – Employing a mixed-methods approach with a cross-sectional design, this research prioritizes qualitative methods supported by quantitative data. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), documentation, and questionnaires.

Findings – Tolerance education is implemented contextually, shaped by each country's socio-political environment. In Cambodia, it is promoted through harmonious intergroup relations, a flexible curriculum, and state support, particularly from the monarchy and the Mufti's autonomy in developing Islamic schools. In Thailand, private Islamic schools implement tolerance by aligning with the royal education framework, encouraging interfaith student interaction, and emphasizing Islamic teachings as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. In Indonesia, state madrasas incorporate tolerance education systematically through national programs like Religious Moderation.

Research implications/limitations – The findings underscore the importance of context-responsive educational policies to foster social harmony and prevent early signs of intolerance. This research is limited to specific regions but offers transferable insights.

Originality/value – This study contributes original insights into how tolerance education can be effectively embedded within Islamic education curricula in minority Muslim contexts by adapting to local policies and cultural dynamics, fostering inclusive Islamic communities based on principles of mercy and coexistence.

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Introduction

Islamic education in the current era is facing the challenge of the emergence of religious extremism movements issues on one side and the development of liberalism and secularism on the other side. The issue of religious extremism movements has hit ASEAN countries including Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia. In Cambodia, for example, Jamaah Islamiah (JI) had once emerged through The Om Al Qura Foundation which Cambodia had successfully overcome it (Iskandar, 2023; Tatara et al., 2023). In Thailand, Muslims often come under attack from far right Buddhists (Noviani & Nazir, 2023) and some view Muslims as identical to the ideology of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) (Fahmi, 2016). In Indonesia, since the Bali bombing incident in 2002, the Indonesian government has been made aware of the need to undertake various efforts to religious deradicalization (Meiza, 2022; Ulyana & Riyansyah, 2021).

The influence of Western cultures, on the other hand, which is dominated by the ideology of liberalism, secularism and materialism also endanger the lives of Muslims (Ahmed, 2021; Ibrahim, 2019; Islam, 2020). Since the early 20th century, many Muslim scholars have helped promote liberal and secular Western ideologies. This phenomenon was driven by a sense of inferiority among some people due to the decline and backwardness of Muslims for centuries of colonization. Some have had a positive impact on the people, but many have also damaged the faith and identity of Muslims (A. Harris, 2018; Araújo, 2021; Kamza et al., 2023). Likewise, the ideology of Western secularism, Naquib al-Attas criticized western secularism as the elimination of the sanctity and absoluteness of religious values or deconsecration of values (Kosim, Kustati, & Murkilim, 2021).

These dynamics place Islamic education in a critical position that must protect its students from extremism and liberalism at once while continuing to uphold religious values. The need for a balanced and contextualized response becomes even more pressing in Muslim minority contexts, where Islamic identity is potentially vulnerable, and external pressures from dominant religious groups or state secular frameworks can be more intense.

To response these challenges, it is necessary to develop tolerance education, especially among minority Muslims such as in Cambodia, Southern Thailand and minority Muslim areas in Indonesia in order to embody an inclusive Muslim society as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. Tolerance education is a systematic effort to creates students with middle attitude (*wasath*), who are not excessive in certain positions, not being radical and extreme, nor having liberal and secular ideologies (Amar, 2018), and capable to have balance between souls and bodies, religious and national affairs, life and afterlife, individual and societal matters, ideals and reality, *aqal* and *naqal*, religious and science point of views, and modernity and tradition in accordance to Islamic teaching (Shihab, 2022). The Cambodian population is predominantly Buddhist (96.9%) with only 2.1% muslims (Sanithabeevi A., 2023). However, the Cambodian government has given permission to organize education for Muslims under the guidance of the Muftis, e.g., Madrasah An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah in Phnom Penh. (Hasram, 2022). In Thailand, the Muslim population is around 5.4% (Farahdiba et al., 2024), mostly resides in Southern Thailand. The Thailand government has also granted the permission for Muslims to manage Islamic educational institutions. In the Southern Thailand region, there is a section of the education

department that manages Islamic educational institutions (Rosdee Mangkachi, *Interview*, July 16, 2024). In Indonesia, on the other hand, there are numerous Muslim minority areas, e.g., in Mentawai Regency, West Sumatra Province, where Islamic boarding schools and State Madrasahs continue to develop in the area (Assaidul Akram, MTsN Mentawai Teacher, *Interview*, January 5, 2024).

The academic problem of this research lies in understanding how Islamic educational institutions in Muslim minority areas of Cambodia, Southern Thailand, and Indonesia respond to the rising challenges of religious extremism and secular-liberal ideologies while promoting tolerance education. Each country presents unique contexts: in Cambodia, the Muslim minority must preserve its identity within a dominant Buddhist framework, relying on state-approved institutions guided by the Muftis. In Southern Thailand, Muslims face distrust and marginalization amid ongoing political tensions, making tolerance education both necessary and sensitive. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, particularly in remote areas like Mentawai, Muslim minorities face isolation and limited resources, yet continue to establish madrasahs and *pesantren* that uphold moderate Islamic values. These differences show that although the challenge is similar, the responses vary according to policy, cultural interaction, and institutional support. A comparative analysis is needed to reveal best practices and contextual strategies for strengthening Islamic education that is inclusive, balanced, and resistant to extremism and liberal excess.

Researches on Islamic education in Cambodia and Thailand have been conducted in numerous separate researches, e.g., Noviani and Nazir who found the similarities of the curriculum in Indonesia and Thailand under Sunni ideology with different systems of the curriculums (Noviani & Nazir, 2023). Yahyani, et al. have conducted a research at *Musa Asiah Integrated School* in improving the quality of Muslim religious education in Cambodia and the tolerance of the majority community (Yahyani et al., 2020). In Indonesia, there are numerous studies related to religious moderation policies. Mukhibat et al. found that the religious moderation education policy was conducted by the government in order to maintain harmony between religious communities in Indonesia with the main goal of reducing intolerance, religious fanaticism, and extremism that could threaten social stability and national security (Mukhibat et al., 2023). However, there has been no previous research on the practice of tolerance education in Muslim minority areas, especially in Muslim minority areas of Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia.

This gap becomes more apparent when we compare the three countries. In Cambodia, despite the limited number of Muslims, tolerance policies allow the integration of Islamic values into the curriculum through madrasahs authorized by state religious bodies. In Southern Thailand, Islamic education is managed under a special division, but is still under scrutiny due to ongoing political and ethnic conflicts. Meanwhile, in Indonesia despite being a Muslim-majority country Muslim minorities in regions such as Mentawai face geographic and logistical challenges in implementing inclusive Islamic education. These differences demonstrate the need for a comparative study of how tolerance education is embedded and adapted in distinct minority Muslim contexts.

This article examines the tolerance education in Islamic minority educational institutions in three countries: Cambodia, Southern Thailand, and Indonesia (especially in Mentawai Regency). There are two objectives of this research: analyzing the tolerance education policy and its implementation in the curriculum in Islamic educational institutions in Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia. This research is important by considering that the similarities of the three countries, which practicing Sunni religious understanding with al-Asy'ari theology, Shafi'i school of thought and Sufism. These religious understandings are actually filled with tolerant and moderate Islamic teachings (Kosim, Kustati, & Samad, 2021). Therefore, good practices in implementing tolerance education need to be examined and socialized to strengthen the existence of Islamic education to avoid negative stigma of Muslim minorities as opposing and extreme groups. It is fitting that Islamic education instills the value of tolerance as a systematic effort to realize students who have a middle attitude (*wasath*), are not excessive in certain positions, are not radical and extreme, nor are they liberal and secular (Amar, 2018), capable to have balance between souls and bodies, religious and national affairs, life and afterlife, individual and societal, ideas and reality, *aqal* and *naqal*, religious and science, and modernity and tradition in accordance with Islamic teachings (Shihab, 2019).

Methods

This research applies mixed methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods where qualitative methods act as the main focus and the quantitative ones as the supporting tools. The design of the research applies is a cross-sectional design. The research was conducted in three areas with minority Muslim populations: in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah School), in Hat Yai, Thailand (Songserm Sasana Vitaya School), and in Mentawai, Indonesia (MTsN 1 Tua Pejat). The informants consisted of leaders, teachers, and students at each school, as well as education officials and local Muslim community leaders.

Data collection was conducted through four methods: 1) Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving leaders, teachers, education officials, and community leaders; 2) in-depth interviews with leaders, teachers, and students using the snowball sampling technique. (Zickar & Keith, 2023); 3) documentation covering regulations, textbooks, and related curricula; and 4) questionnaires distributed to students in the three madrasas which contain questions about understanding and attitudes of tolerance. Here, a purposive sampling technique was used where sampling was based on certain characteristics that were considered closely related to previously known population characteristics and adjusted to certain criteria in accordance with the research objectives (Campbell et al., 2020), through understanding the implementation of tolerance education in educational institutions.

Data validity is obtained through triangulation of sources and methods (van Hasselt, 2021). Source triangulation was conducted by collecting data from various parties to obtain diverse perspectives, and method triangulation used interviews, FGDs, and documentation to overcome the weaknesses of one method. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns from qualitative data, which included familiarization, coding, theme searching,

and theme review. Narrative analysis was also applied to understand the experiences of participants, and conclusions were drawn by connecting themes to research theories or hypotheses, providing in-depth insights into the policies and implementation of tolerance education in the Islamic educational institutions studied.

Result and Discussion

1. Minority Muslims in Cambodia, Thailand, and Mentawai

The life of Muslim communities as minorities in Cambodia, Thailand, and the Mentawai Islands reflects the dynamics of the relationship between religion, the state, and education in the context of plural societies. Referring to the theory of social integration and religious pluralism proposed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, the existence of minority groups within a majority social structure is greatly influenced by institutional recognition and structural support from the state (Mizan, 2009).

According to *IIIT-Cambodia* (2023), the Muslim community in Cambodia, known as Malayo-Champa, comprises about 6% of the predominantly Buddhist population of 17 million. They are descendants of the Champa Kingdom which embraced Islam in the 15th century. The process of Islamization of the Cham community has been taking place gradually since the 15th century. Although they have adopted much of the Malay culture, some Cham people still maintain pre-Islamic traditions mixed with contemporary religious practices (Mufti of Cambodia, interview, 2024). A dark history also colors the existence of Muslims in Cambodia, especially during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), which caused the deaths of between 400,000 and 500,000 Muslims out of a population of around 700,000. This period caused physical destruction and resulted in a great loss of human and intellectual Muslim resources. However, since the post-civil war recovery era, especially after the democratic elections in 1993, the Muslim community has begun to revive along with the national harmonization and reconciliation policies supported by the government (Cholik & Patilima, 2023). Significant political support also came from Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has explicitly shown positive affiliation towards the Muslim community.

A similar situation is also found in Thailand, where Islam is a minority religion practiced by around 5.4% of the total population. The majority of Thai Muslims live in the southern region known as Greater Pattani, covering five provinces: Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun, and Songkhla. History records that Islam entered this region since the 10th or 11th century through trade routes with Arabs and India. The process of Islamization reached its peak when King Phaya Tu Nakpa converted to Islam and became Sultan Ismail Syah (Amin & Hasaruddin, 2023). Scholars from Aceh, such as Shaikh Said and Shaikh Daud al-Fathani, also played an important role in building the foundations of Islamic scholarship in the region (Manan et al., 2022). Although the Thai government formally guarantees freedom of religion, the south remains a flashpoint for ethno-religious conflict. National policies, such as the 1940 Cultural Mandate, which promoted the use of Thai language and culture, are often seen as a form of forced assimilation and have been met with resistance from local communities (Djamil et al., 2022). Despite peace negotiation initiatives and the promotion of multiculturalism, discrimination against religious and linguistic minorities is

still exist (Joll, 2021), even the younger generation of Muslims are now starting to lose their ability to speak Malay.

In Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world—Islam is the dominant identity. However, in the local context, there are certain areas where Muslims are actually a minority group, such as the Mentawai Islands Regency in West Sumatra Province where the majority of the population is Christian (48.5%) and Catholic (29.09%), while Muslims are only around 22.22%. The process of Islam entering Mentawai took place peacefully and accommodately, where Islamic teachings were accepted while maintaining various elements of local culture. However, challenges remain. Many individuals embrace Islam for pragmatic reasons such as access to formal education and scholarships, but the lack of religious guidance and mentoring can cause some converts to return to their old beliefs (Nelmaya & Deswalantri, 2021).

Although Muslims are a minority group in all three regions, the governments of each country still provide formal recognition to Muslims. In Cambodia, for example, the government appointed a national *Mufti*, Naek Oknha Sok Kamry (Haji Kamaruddin bin Yusof), as the leader of the Muslim community. In Thailand, the position of Chularajmontri or Syaikhul Islam is officially appointed by the government and is under the supervision of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Education. In Indonesia, there is an Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs that actively handles religious affairs, including the Section for Islamic Education and Islamic Guidance, in addition to services to the Christian community. The existence of this institution not only guarantees the religious rights of minority groups, but also becomes an important instrument in managing plurality and preventing religious-based radicalism.

The above findings show that Muslim communities in Cambodia, Thailand, and Mentawai face conditions as minorities that are formally recognized by the state, but with different social dynamics. In Cambodia, despite experiencing genocide during the Khmer Rouge era, the Muslim community managed to bounce back with state support after 1993. In Thailand, the long history of Islamization in the south has not entirely eliminated assimilation pressures, and new challenges have emerged in the form of weakened linguistic and cultural identities. In Indonesia, particularly in Mentawai, the Muslim minority status amid Christian and Catholic dominance has resulted in a peaceful Islamization process but also one prone to pragmatic conversions. All three cases demonstrate that state recognition of Muslim minorities does not always correlate with the strengthening of internal communities. Although religious institutional structures are available in all three countries, their effectiveness depends heavily on the local socio-political context and the community's readiness to defend its religious identity.

2. Tolerance Education Policy

This research is grounded in the conceptual framework of *Wasatiyyah Islam* (Islamic moderation), which emphasizes a balanced, just, and contextualized approach to religious life, particularly in education. As articulated by al-Qaradawi (1994), *wasatiyyah* stands against both extremism and liberalism, promoting equilibrium between faith and reason,

tradition and modernity, and spiritual and worldly affairs. The theory is further supported by al-Attas (Kosim, Kustati, & Murkilim, 2021), who critiques Western secularism for undermining the sacredness of knowledge, and advocates for the reintegration of Islamic values in education. This framework is particularly relevant in the Southeast Asian context where Muslim minorities must navigate the pressures of religious identity, state policies, and interfaith coexistence. Moreover, tolerance education is situated within the broader discourse of “transformative education theory” (Mezirow, 2000), which views education as a means to foster critical consciousness, intercultural understanding, and social cohesion, key elements in constructing inclusive Islamic education systems in multicultural and multireligious societies.

Tolerance education policies in Southeast Asia show a variety of distinctive yet consistent approaches to the values of diversity, inclusivity, and social cohesion. All three countries Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia display policy patterns that reflect active government efforts to ensure religious freedom, support Islamic education, and integrate values of tolerance into their national education systems.

In terms of legal and ideological framework, each country has built a strong foundation to guarantee religious freedom and the right to receive education according to one’s beliefs. Cambodia shows a strong state commitment to guarantee religious freedom and Muslim participation in the education system. Under the coordination of the Mufti, a number of strategic policies have been implemented to support the active participation of Muslims in the national education system. The Muslim community is given the freedom to practice their religion and full rights to develop formal Islamic educational institutions. The policy of religious harmony in Cambodia has been highly promoted, especially as the Cambodian Muslim community enjoys full freedom to practice its Islamic beliefs, including: Full right to receive Budget Donations from Donators, organizations and associations from Muslim countries; 1,500 Cambodian Islamic teachers recruited as civil servants, receiving salaries from the Royal Government; Muslim female students allowed to wear hijab in all public schools and all national institutes and universities; Cambodian Muslims are allowed to wear Islamic uniforms or receive hijab during the photo shoot for official documents; Since the 6th National Election, hundreds of Cambodian Muslim community leaders have been appointed senior government leaders from national to Sub-national level such as: Member of senate, member of parliaments, Senior Ministers, Secretary of states and deputy provincial governors, and so on (IIIT-Cambodia, 2023).

In Thailand, like Cambodia with a Buddhist majority, but Thailand has a significant Muslim community in its southern regions, such as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. The Thai government has established the Private Education Department in five southern provinces in 2009, namely Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun, and Songkhla, to facilitate the management of Islamic education in a structured and professional manner. The existence of this institution is not only an administrative forum, but also a symbol of integration between the national education system and the local needs of the Muslim community. In areas such as Songkhla, this policy is implemented selectively, only in four districts: Chana,

Nathawi, Thepha, and Saba Yoi, which have high concentrations of Muslim populations. This reflects the local context-based approach taken by the Thai government.

In Indonesia, on the other hand, there are several regulations that represent tolerance education policies. Pancasila, especially the first principle "Belief in the One Almighty God", contains the principle of religious inclusivity that respects diversity of beliefs. The 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia through Article 28E and Article 29 provides constitutional guarantees for religious freedom and the right to receive education according to one's beliefs, which are important normative foundations in designing curricula and education policies that uphold tolerance between religious communities. Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, article 4 emphasizes that education must be implemented democratically, fairly, and non-discriminatory, and uphold local religious and cultural values. Technically, Government Regulation Number 55 of 2007 concerning Religious Education and Religious Teachings clearly regulates the role of religious education in forming a religious character that is balanced between spirituality and social tolerance.

In the institutional structure of Islamic education, the three countries show a distinctive model of integration and adaptation. In Cambodia, the kingdom handed over to the Mufti to take care of religious matters, including Islamic educational institutions, such as Madrasah An-Nikmah Al-Islamiyah, which has now developed into a network of 21 madrasahs. After the Pol Pot period, Islamic educational institutions in Cambodia received assistance from the Kingdom of Kelantan, so that the final certificates or diplomas received by students still follow the exams from the country. Currently, Madrasah an-Nikmah covers the levels of kindergarten (1-2 years), Ibtidaiyah (6 years), Mutawassithah (3 years), and Tsanawiyah (3 years, equivalent to STAM Malaysia). The curriculum refers to leading Islamic institutions in Malaysia, such as the Department of Islamic Religion Selangor (JAIS) and the Islamic Foundation of Kelantan (YIK), as well as the Ministry of Education of Malaysia.

In Thailand, the system of education consists of three main levels, namely Primary & Secondary Education, Vocational and Technical Education, and Higher Education. The Islamic education system is divided into two main types: royal-affiliated Islamic schools and private Islamic schools. Although different in management structure, both receive educational funding support from the government. Royal schools also adopt many of the curriculum systems and learning styles typical of Islamic institutions. This creates an inclusive space where Islamic educational institutions are not only accepted but also become a model of education. In addition, there is also a kind of non-formal Islamic educational institution, called Taman Pendidikan Kanak-Kanak (TADIKA) which focuses on children aged 3 to 12 years. This institution provides mosque-based education with the language of instruction in Malay in Jawi and Rumi scripts as the identity of Patani. The educational process at TADIKA takes place every weekend, namely Saturday and Sunday from 08AM to 04PM and has experienced curriculum strengthening and teacher competency improvement over the past five years with a minimum teacher qualification of S1 (Anmen Kadasae, a high-ranking official of the Private Education Office in Yala, Interview, July 2024).

In Indonesia, there are formal Islamic educational institutions such as *madrasah* (*ibtidaiyah*, *tsanawiyah*, and *Aliyah*) to universities, e.g., Islamic Universities which are state and private. There are also Islamic boarding schools that focus on the study of *tafaqquh fi ad-din* in the form of formal *diniyah*, *mu'adalah*, *khalafiyah* (modern), and *salafiyah* (traditional). There is also non-formal education such as *madrasah diniyah takmiliyah* and Al-Quran educational institutions that teach religious education and the Quran for students studying in public schools (elementary and secondary). The development of these Islamic educational institutions is in the working area of the Ministry of Religion. Thus, the state ideology based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution must be the basis for the development of these Islamic educational institutions so that they continue to display a religious, moderate and inclusive attitude.

In terms of curriculum and learning integration, the three countries have shown serious efforts to synergize religious education and general education. As in *Madrasah an-Nikmah* managed by the Mufti, the *madrasah* curriculum includes 13 main subjects, including: *Al-Quran and Tajweed*, *Fiqh and Faraid*, *Tauhid and mantiq*, *Tafsir and Ulum at-Tafsir*, *Ulumul Hadith*, *Nahwu and Sharf*, *Adab and Nushush*, *Balaghah*, *Insyah* and *Muthalaah*. *Urud Qafiah*, up to three languages: Arabic, English, and Malay. The main focus remains on deepening religious knowledge (*tafaqquh fi al-din*), with limitations in the provision of general subjects such as English, science and mathematics. Since 2024, Islamic Education staff who also come from *Madrasah an-Nikmah* (Mufti's envoy) under the Ministry of Education have compiled a national curriculum roadmap for Islamic Education that is in accordance to the needs of Cambodian Muslims.

Islamic educational institutions in Thailand implement two curricula simultaneously: the national (academic) curriculum and the Islamic curriculum. The academic curriculum includes subjects such as Thai, Mathematics, Science, and Foreign Languages which are evaluated through the O-NET (Ordinary National Exam Test). The learning system for the academic curriculum is scheduled from Monday to Friday, with class hours from 08AM to 04PM. Meanwhile, the Islamic curriculum includes lessons on the *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, *Aqidah*, *Morals*, and *Arabic*, with evaluation through the I-NET (Islamic Education National Test). The learning systems for both take place simultaneously from Monday to Friday, from 08AM–04PM, reflecting an effort to integrate religious and general education.

In Indonesia, tolerance education is integrated into the curriculum and intracurricular, extracurricular, and co-curricular learning through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (*Proyek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila - P5*) and the Rahmatan lil Alamin Student Profile (*Profil Pelajar Rahmatan lil Alamin - PPRA*) in *madrasahs*. Likewise, the religious moderation program managed by the Ministry of Religion must be integrated into learning. In *Pesantren Mardhatillah* and MTsN 1 Kepulauan Mentawai, although the level of implementation is different, both show adaptive efforts in internalizing the values of moderation and tolerance into the learning process.

The role of government and community also appears to complement each other in the three countries. In Cambodia, collaboration between the state, religious figures (Mufti), and foreign NGOs strengthens a moderate and inclusive Islamic education system.

Thailand adopts a collaborative approach between the central government, the Private Education Office, local Muslim communities and even universities such as Fatoni University. Initiatives such as strengthening the TADIKa curriculum and school-community partnerships in interfaith programs are good practices in building social cohesion. In Indonesia, the central government through the Ministry of Religion has formulated a policy of religious moderation which is a normative and practical framework, although its implementation in areas such as Mentawai still faces top-down challenges and resource constraints.

All three countries also display local, contextual approaches to delivering Islamic education in minority areas. In Cambodia, Muslims continue to have full access to religious education amidst the dominance of Buddhists. Thailand has developed a selective approach in Southern Thailand and in districts with high Muslim concentrations, such as Songkhla, demonstrating geographic sensitivity in policy formulation. In Indonesia, it was done by implementing P5-PPRA, religious moderation and support for Islamic educational institutions in the Mentawai Islands, demonstrates policy inclusivity although implementation and decentralization challenges remain issues that need to be addressed.

These findings show that all three countries, Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia, have formal commitments to mainstreaming values of tolerance into Islamic education policies, although their approaches differ according to their respective local contexts and socio-political structures. Cambodia provides ample space for Muslims in religious practice and education management, including the appointment of teachers as civil servants and freedom of dress. Thailand adopts a regional-based approach, with Islamic education policies focused in areas with high Muslim populations, and a dual-integrated education system (national and Islamic). Meanwhile, Indonesia integrates tolerance values into the curriculum through the P5-PPRA and religious moderation programs, though implementation varies across regions. All three demonstrate a pattern of synergy between the state and communities in strengthening tolerant Islamic education, yet challenges remain at the implementation level, particularly in minority areas or those with limited resources.

3. Implementation of Tolerance Education in the Curriculum

The implementation of tolerance education in Islamic educational institutions in minority Muslim communities in Southeast Asia is an important part of strengthening Islamic identity while building harmonious social relations. In this context, Islamic educational institutions in Cambodia, Southern Thailand, and Mentawai Indonesia present unique approaches but have a common thread in terms of the values they instill. Although all of them are under pressure as minority communities, Islamic education is still able to adapt contextual and inclusive curricula and learning practices.

In the Mentawai Islands, Islamic education is not only an instrument of preaching, but also a fortress of identity. The curriculum used at MTsN 1 Mentawai Islands is based on the independent curriculum, madrasas such as MAS Mardhatillah and MTsN 1 Mentawai Islands are the 2013 Curriculum, which basically does not have a specific subject on

tolerance. However, teachers actively insert values of tolerance in subjects such as Akidah Akhlak, Jurisprudence, and History of Islamic Culture. A prominent good practice is intracurricular learning in the subject of Akidah Akhlak, which contains material on *tasamuh*, as well as the integration of values of tolerance in various other subjects, in accordance with the spirit of Religious Moderation and P5-PPRA. Teachers also advise convert students to continue practicing Islam, respecting non-Muslim parents, without following the practices of other religions. In everyday life, teachers become role models of tolerance by establishing good relationships with non-Muslim residents, and guiding students to remain active in interacting and helping others regardless of religion.

The similar practices are also found in Southern Thailand, a Muslim-majority region but in a Buddhist-dominated country. In the provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, private madrasahs and Islamic boarding schools play an important role in shaping a moderate understanding of Islam. The model of tolerance education in Islamic schools in Southern Thailand, such as Phatna Witya School Yala, displays an integration of character education, religious values, and multiculturalism. In the Thai Malay context, tolerance education is known as “*Tolak Ansur*”. This school has various good practices, such as character education mentoring by teachers as *murabby*, class councils as a form of coaching between students, interfaith social service activities, the Young Counseling program that brings together students from various backgrounds, and learning Thai and Malay to bridge cultures. In addition, students are taught the principles of 3 TA: *ta’aruf* (getting to know each other), *tafahum* (understanding each other), and *ta’awun* (helping each other). National extracurricular activities involving the military also show efforts to integrate Muslim students into the Thai state framework.

Meanwhile, in Cambodia, Islamic educational institutions face different structural challenges. Islamic education is generally conducted informally in community madrasahs or through mosque-based religious activities. The absence of official recognition from the state for Islamic educational institutions means that the curriculum used is highly dependent on local initiatives and foreign aid. However, good practices are still found, such as in Madrasah An-Nikmah al-Islamiyah, which teaches tolerance education in two main dimensions: faith and social-state. In grade 4 Tsanawiyah (equivalent to grade XI), there is an Akhlak subject with the book “*Min Adab al-Muslim wa Huququ*”, which contains a discussion of “Muslim Adab with Non-Muslims”. Students are taught the principle of “*lakum diinukum wa liyadiin*” and QS al-Mumtahanah verse 8, with an emphasis that although they are not allowed to cooperate in faith, Muslims are still obliged to be fair and do good to non-Muslims who are not hostile. These values are practiced in everyday life and are part of the madrasah education culture.

The differences in these approaches can be traced back to a combination of national policy orientation, cultural heterogeneity, and institutional infrastructure. In Indonesia, the state promotes an inclusive national ideology (Pancasila) and supports religious moderation as part of the official curriculum. However, in remote areas like Mentawai, weak infrastructure and minority status create implementation challenges. In Southern Thailand, the central government adopts a geographically selective policy that recognizes

the ethno-religious distinctiveness of the South, yet often integrates Islamic education within a securitized framework due to ongoing conflict. This results in a hybrid model that emphasizes both accommodation and state control. In contrast, Cambodia reflects a low-interventionist state approach; the absence of a formal Islamic education framework creates autonomy but also limits institutional capacity and oversight. Each region also reflects different cultural dynamics. In Mentawai, cultural isolation and interreligious household environments significantly influence students' religious choices. In Southern Thailand, Malay-Islamic identity plays a central role in community resilience and educational activism. Meanwhile, Cambodian Muslims (Cham) historically marginalized, have developed a grassroots model of religious education grounded in transnational support and community cohesion.

Despite these divergent contexts, all three regions report positive outcomes. Survey data shows high levels of student tolerance across various indicators—freedom of speech, respect for other religions, interfaith cooperation, and solidarity—ranging from 79% to 90%. This suggests that even without an explicitly mandated subject on tolerance, effective teaching strategies, school culture, and community involvement can nurture pluralistic values. With a collaborative approach rooted in local wisdom, Islamic educational institutions across Cambodia, Southern Thailand, and the Mentawai Islands have demonstrated that Islam can serve as a foundation for peace and coexistence. Tolerance education, therefore, is not merely a reactive adaptation to marginality but a proactive articulation of Islam as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. These institutions, though facing diverse structural limitations, continue to function as fortresses of values and catalysts of social transformation in Southeast Asia's plural societies.

In practice, these three regions face unique challenges. In Mentawai, family pressure on Muslim students, especially in terms of food, religious celebrations, and lifestyle, is a serious challenge. Not a few students end up changing religions due to weak family support and minimal religious facilities. In Southern Thailand, challenges arise from the integration of the national education system which is not always in line with local Islamic values. Meanwhile, in Cambodia, the main challenges are limited resources, the lack of official recognition, and minimal teacher training.

Nevertheless, efforts to educate tolerance have yielded positive results. The results of a questionnaire distributed to students from the three regions show that Islamic education plays a significant role in forming positive attitudes towards diversity. The following table shows students' attitudes of tolerance based on the results of the questionnaire:

Table 1. Students' Tolerance Attitudes in Islamic Educational Institutions in Minority Muslim Communities

No	Indicators	Mentawai (%) (MTsN 1 & MAS)	Thailand (%) (Islamic School Yala)	Cambodia (%) (Madrasah an-Nikmah)
1	Freedom of Speech	84	81	79

2	Respecting the worship of people of different religions	90	87	85
3	Working with people of different religions	88	85	83
4	Helping friends of different religions	87	88	84

The data shows that the majority of students in the three regions have a high level of tolerance, both in terms of freedom of speech, respect for other religious worship, cooperation, and solidarity towards others. This shows that although the formal curriculum does not always include tolerance education explicitly, its implementation can be effective through teacher teaching strategies, strengthening values in school social life, and community involvement.

With a collaborative approach and based on local wisdom, Islamic educational institutions in these three regions have succeeded in showing that Islam can be a driving force for the realization of a harmonious and tolerant society. Tolerance education is not merely a response to external pressure, but an integral part of the vision of Islam as a religion of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*. Thus, despite facing various limitations, these institutions have asserted their role as a fortress of values and agents of social transformation in the context of plural societies in Southeast Asia.

Tolerance education in minority Muslim communities in Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia (Mentawai Islands) reflects the diverse approaches of countries in ensuring religious freedom, social integration, and multicultural harmony through the Islamic education system. Each country shows different forms of accommodation, but still leads to strengthening tolerance and inclusivity. Tolerance education in minority communities can be explained through the inclusive religious education approach. (Suparjo et al., 2022), which emphasizes the importance of aligning religious values with pluralistic norms in a democratic society so as to create togetherness and brotherhood between religious communities. In the context of Southeast Asian countries, this approach is developed through state recognition of the religious and ethnocultural identities of minorities, as well as the establishment of an accommodating education system (Malović & Vujica, 2021) underlines that religious education in a multicultural society needs to focus on dialogue based on shared experiences, not just doctrinal differences. Thus, Islamic education in Muslim minority communities must be context-based, not just dogmatic.

The three countries in this study provide different forms of recognition for Muslim minorities. Cambodia provides symbolic and administrative support to the Cham Muslim community through the appointment of a national mufti, the provision of salaries for religious teachers, and guarantees of the right to worship. This approach is in line with the pragmatic pluralism model (Akmagambetova et al., 2023) where Southeast Asian countries choose a compromise path to accommodate religious communities within an inclusive nationalist framework.

Thailand, through its Islamic private education system, especially in the southern region, has developed a form of semi-autonomous education governance (Smith & Gasparian, 2018) which allows the Muslim community to carry out Islamic education while

remaining within the corridor of national policy. Indonesia affirms its commitment to pluralism through the integration of tolerance education in national curriculum policies, such as in madrasas with the P5-PPRA and Religious Moderation programs, reflecting an integrative model as explained by Kosim, et al. (2024) in the study of the development of Islamic education curriculum based on religious moderation.

From the institutional side, Islamic education in minority communities has undergone a process of adaptation to the structure of the non-Muslim majority state. In Cambodia, the madrasah curriculum is independently compiled, especially in Madrasah an-Nikmah which is managed by the Mufti, which still refers to Islamic educational institutions in Malaysia. This phenomenon reflects a form of "transnational Islamic education" where local Islamic institutions depend on external support to maintain the continuity of education. However, this transnational Islamic education is not in the context of Salafi education which can be a threat to the global democratic order, as feared by Suharto (2018).

In Southern Thailand, the integration of religious and general curriculum implemented by several formal Islamic educational institutions is in accordance to the integrative education model. Yulianto and Fitri (2021) also found that Chongkraksat Wittaya Pattani School implemented an integrative curriculum, namely the religious curriculum (*Sassanah*), which contains *Dirasah Islamiyah*, and the academic curriculum (*Saman*) which contains general subject matter. Wekke's Study (2018) shows that madrasas and Islamic schools in Southern Thailand function as centers for the preservation of Malay-Islamic identity and at the same time as a forum for dialogue between the state and Muslim society.

Meanwhile in Indonesia, more varied Islamic educational institutions are found, such as madrasas, Islamic boarding schools, and Integrated Islamic Schools. Madrasas and schools also accommodate general and religious lessons. Even some private schools state that they have Integrated Islamic Schools that implement an integrative education model. Likewise, Muhammadiyah schools develop a holistic integrative approach (Hamami & Nuryana, 2022). Even madrasas in Indonesia have an important role in forming moderate attitudes, respecting diversity, and encouraging social cohesion, especially in minority areas such as Mentawai.

The results of the study show that the implementation of tolerance education in third countries is carried out with a contextual and community-based approach. In Mentawai, madrasa teachers play a central role as agents of character formation and social attitudes of students in a predominantly non-Muslim environment. Sudirman (2019) also found that the success of tolerance education depends on the competence and social sensitivity of teachers to local dynamics.

In Southern Thailand and Cambodia, educational institutions combine Islamic teachings with local values of harmony and peace. This model supports the theory of localizing peace education (Gittins, 2021; Kroeker, 2020), which emphasizes the importance of local culture-based tolerance education as a tool for conflict resolution and increasing social cohesion. This is relevant to the conditions in Cambodia which previously

experienced conflict with the Communists during the Pol Pot era, and Southern Thailand which is still prone to conflict between some Malay Muslim communities and the kingdom's policies that prioritize Buddhist culture.

Despite the success, there remain significant challenges. In Mentawai, the sustainability of post-conversion Islamic education and limited educational facilities are major obstacles. Islamic education in remote and minority areas requires stronger state guidance in terms of resources and teacher training (Agustin et al., 2022). In Thailand, the issue of Buddhist nationalism and identity politics sometimes becomes an obstacle to the integration of Islamic madrasahs. Rahayu et al.'s study (2022) noted that the process of national education standardization in Thailand could clash with the cultural and religious needs of the Malay-Muslim community in the South. Meanwhile, in Cambodia, the Prime Minister's political support for the addition of teachers paid by the kingdom has not continued. This condition requires persuasive efforts and the Islamic community needs to convince the kingdom to continue to pay attention to the continuity of Islamic educational institutions in Cambodia. In addition, the absence of a national Islamic education curriculum can have an impact on the quality of Islamic educational institutions themselves.

On the contrary, opportunities remain open through contextual curriculum reform, teacher training based on moderate values, and collaboration between the government, educational institutions, and civil society. Those three countries have the potential to develop a model of Islamic education that is tolerant and relevant to their respective local contexts, while strengthening social peace in the Southeast Asian region. Moreover, all three have relatively similar traditions with Malay roots and adhere to the *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah* ideology with al-Ash'ari theology and the Syafi'i school of thought, tending to form a more moderate attitude of the people. A study conducted by Imam Kanafi, et al. (2021) found that the established and consistent theology of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah* in various fields contributed to building a moderate and tolerant Islamic character.

Conclusion

This study addresses the central question of how tolerance education is conceptualized and implemented in Islamic educational institutions within minority Muslim communities in Southeast Asia, specifically in Indonesia (Mentawai), Thailand (Southern provinces), and Cambodia. The findings reveal that all three countries have adopted distinct approaches. The differences are rooted in the socio-political configurations, cultural dynamics, and the position of Islam within the national ideology. In Indonesia, the integration of tolerance values is systematically embedded through national initiatives such as the *P5-PPRA* and the Religious Moderation agenda. This reflects a strong institutional commitment to inclusive education, even in peripheral areas like Mentawai. In contrast, Cambodia's approach is characterized by community-driven efforts and support from international networks, operating within a context of limited state recognition and informal religious education. Thailand, meanwhile, reflects the tension between centralized national policies and local Islamic educational autonomy in its southern provinces, shaped by long-standing ethno-religious contestations.

These diverse trajectories indicate that tolerance education is not a uniform policy but is deeply contingent upon national identity politics, cultural pluralism, and institutional capacity. It also shows that the success of tolerance education depends not only on curriculum design but also on teacher agency, community participation, and the ability to negotiate between religious identity and civic responsibility. The study thus concludes that tolerance education in Islamic contexts should be understood as both a pedagogical and political process, one that requires a balance between state-led policies and grassroots engagement. Strengthening tolerance education requires not only formal curriculum reforms but also investments in teacher training, intercultural dialogue, and inclusive governance.

For further scientific development, this study recommends micro-studies based on participant experiences in the field, longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of tolerance education, and comparisons between other non-Muslim countries to broaden the perspective on Islamic education and social cohesion. Gender-based studies and child protection are also important domains that have not been widely explored in the context of Islamic tolerance education in Southeast Asia. Thus, tolerance education in the Islamic education system is not only a tool for building social harmony, but also a policy strategy that plays a vital role in strengthening national identity, social justice, and national resilience in a multicultural and plural society.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

This research is a collaboration between UIN Imam Bonjol Padang with Cambodia University of Management and Technology Cambodia and Fatoni University Thailand. The UIN Imam Bonjol Padang Research Team is responsible for data collection in Indonesia, two of whom, Muhammad Kosim and Suryadi Fajri, also collected data in Cambodia accompanied by Hosen Mohamad Farid and with Mahamadaree Waeno in Southern Thailand. All research teams collaborated in compiling and analyzing research results to compiling articles for publication.

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Data availability statement

Data for this study were obtained from three sources: good practices in implementing tolerance education in Islamic educational institutions in Muslim minority areas, namely Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Yala, Thailand, and Mentawai, Indonesia, conducted by the research team.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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