JSGS Journal of Sociology in the Global South

Volume 1 Issue 1 | APRIL 2026
e-ISSN: 3125-036X
https://ejournal.selectaedukasi.id/index.php/jsgs

Islamic Religious Education and Political Socialization in Indonesia: Navigating Democratic Values in a Plural Society

https://doi.org/10.67412/jsgs.v1i1.6

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Abstract

This study explores the strategic role of Indonesia's Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teacher association in shaping political discourse on IRE within a plural and democratic society. It examines the association's influence on policy debates promoting democratic values and pluralism, as well as its advocacy in addressing intolerance, identity politics, and national curriculum reform. Employing a qualitative case study with critical discourse analysis, data were collected through in-depth interviews with national and regional leaders and member teachers, participatory observation in public and internal events, and analysis of organizational statutes, policy recommendations, and official publications. Thematic analysis identified recurring narratives on democracy and pluralism, while discourse analysis examined the construction of meaning in official statements and training materials. Findings indicate that the association acts as a hybrid entity—both a professional body and an advocacy actor—capable of directing policy towards an inclusive civic Islam compatible with democratic norms. Nonetheless, it faces internal tensions from members' diverse backgrounds and external pressures from political, regulatory, and socio-religious dynamics. The study's novelty lies in shifting attention from students and curricula to the political agency of teacher organizations, offering fresh insights into their mediating role between religious values and democratic principles in education policy.

Keywords: *Advocacy, Democratic Values, Identity Politics, Islamic Religious Education, Political Discourse*

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Article Info:

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Received manuscript: *14/09/2025*
Final revision: *25/02/2026*
Approved: *26/03/2026*
Online Access: *27/03/2026*
Published: *27/03/2026*

How to cite: Assiddiqi, M. M., & Nugraha, A. W. (2026). Islamic Religious Education and Political Socialization in Indonesia: Navigating Democratic Values in a Plural Society. *Journal of Sociology in the Global South (JSGS), 1*(1), 64-82. https://doi.org/10.67412/jsgs.v1i1.6

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Jalan Utan Panjang III, Kemayoran, Jakarta 10650, Indonesia
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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country with highly complex diversity in religion, ethnicity, language, and culture, and is also one of the largest democracies in the world. Within this plural social landscape, religious education—particularly Islamic Religious Education (PAI)—plays a strategic role not only as a vehicle for transmitting religious values but also as an instrument for shaping citizens' character to respect differences and uphold democratic principles. Amid globalization, democratization, and the rise of identity politics, religious education faces increasingly complex challenges: how to ensure that religious values can be articulated in harmony with democracy and pluralism without losing their authenticity (Dwiki Nur Halimi et al., 2025; Helena Octavianne et al., 2024). One of the key actors in this space is the Association of Islamic Religious Education Teachers (AGPAI), a professional teacher organization with

reach from the national to local levels.

AGPAI's role is not limited to the professional development of PAI teachers, but extends to policy advocacy, public opinion formation, and responses to socio-political issues such as intolerance, curriculum reform, and education regulations. In fact, AGPAI is often among the parties invited by the government and legislative bodies to engage in dialogue regarding PAI policy formulation (Amin & Ritonga, 2024; Barker, 2024; Benawa et al., 2023). In addition, its social media platforms and official publications contain narratives that are not only pedagogical but also political, particularly concerning the strengthening of democracy, tolerance, and national values. However, the diversity of members' backgrounds and external pressures from political and socio-religious dynamics place AGPAI in a position where maintaining the consistency of its vision is not always easy.

The relationship between religious education and democracy has been the focus of many researchers. According to Ayoub & Stoeckl (2024) and Pribadi (2022), Islamic education in Indonesia has a long history of fostering national consciousness, yet the challenges of the reform era require a transformation of approach to remain relevant to modern democratic values. Research by Dian et al. (2023) and Matemba (2021) shows that religious education can serve as a means of strengthening democracy when taught from an inclusive perspective that emphasizes universal values such as justice and tolerance.

Several studies have also highlighted the importance of teachers as cultural-political actors. Bein (2022) asserts that PAI teachers do not merely teach religious content but also shape students' thinking frameworks regarding the relationship between religion and the state. In this context, teacher organizations such as AGPAI can function as a "discursive space" where democratic and pluralistic values are negotiated within a religious framework. Furthermore, studies by Arifin et al. (2024) and Hasan & Juhannis (2024) underline that Islamic education in Indonesia stands at a crossroads between tendencies toward religious exclusivism and inclusive civic Islam. This aligns with Saada's (2023) findings that societal religious understanding can influence political orientations toward democracy. In this regard, teacher associations serve as an important channel for influencing the direction of religious education policy discourse.

Research by Afdhal & Hidayat (2019), Azmiyah & Astutik (2021), and Widodo et al. (2022) on teacher associations generally focuses on professional development, while their role in political advocacy for religious education has been relatively underexplored. Widayati et al.'s (2021) study on the role of the Indonesian Teachers Association (PGRI) in education policy issues shows that teacher associations possess significant advocacy capacity, yet there has been no in-depth study examining AGPAI as a political actor in the PAI arena.

Additionally, studies by Kusanagi (2022) and Tambak & Sukenti (2024) on socio-religious movements in Indonesia show that religion-based organizations can act as catalysts for renewing political discourse, provided they can build narratives compatible with pluralism. In AGPAI's case, few studies have explored how such narratives are constructed and negotiated amid internal diversity and external pressures.

Other research also offers important perspectives. For instance, Hasra et al. (2025) and Shodiq (2024) demonstrate that in multicultural countries, inclusively managed religious education can be an instrument of social reconciliation. Similarly, studies by Akhsin & Sa'ad (2025), Ku (2024), and Masduki et al. (2025) on multicultural citizenship emphasize that education sensitive to differences in identity can strengthen social cohesion. Although there has been substantial research on Islamic religious education and democracy, most has focused on students, curriculum, or policy from the perspective of the state. There is almost no study that places the Islamic Religious Education teachers' association as the main subject of analysis, let alone one that views them as hybrid actors—both professional and political—capable of influencing public discourse and policy. Research on teacher associations in Indonesia also tends to highlight their technical role in professional development rather than their strategic role in shaping political-religious narratives compatible with democracy and pluralism.

This study takes a different stance: it does not merely view AGPAI as an institution supporting teachers but as a discursive arena where Islamic values, democracy, and pluralism are brought together, negotiated, and disseminated. By focusing on internal dynamics, advocacy strategies, and the construction of public narratives, this research seeks to fill the gap in the literature and offer new insights into the political dimensions of religious education in Indonesia.

Based on this framework, this study aims to: (1) examine the extent to which AGPAI influences PAI policy discourse oriented toward democratic and pluralistic values; (2) reveal AGPAI's advocacy role in responding to political issues such as intolerance, identity politics, and curriculum reform; (3) map the internal and external challenges faced by AGPAI in maintaining a democratic vision; and (4) analyze the paradigm of Islamic religious education promoted by AGPAI, whether it leans toward religious exclusivism or inclusive civic Islam. In doing so, this study is expected to broaden the horizon of research on the relationship between religious education, politics, and democracy in Indonesia, while offering a new perspective on the potential of teacher associations as agents of social change.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach because its primary aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes, meanings, and social dynamics underlying the role of the Association of Islamic Religious Education Teachers (AGPAI) in articulating the values of democracy and pluralism within the context of religious education. This approach was chosen not merely to obtain descriptive data, but also to explore the perspectives, experiences, and lived narratives of those directly involved. As noted by Cho et al. (2022) and Muurlink & Thomsen (2024), qualitative research allows researchers to enter respondents' social worlds, capture the meanings they assign to reality, and understand the processes shaping their actions.

The research location was selected purposively, namely in areas where AGPAI engages in intensive activities both at the central and regional levels. The selection was based on the

consideration that in these areas, AGPAI is actively involved in public discussions, policy advocacy, and teacher capacity-building programs that strongly embody the values of democracy and pluralism. Furthermore, these locations possess a high degree of social diversity, enabling the researcher to observe how AGPAI interacts with the dynamics of real-world pluralism. Location selection also took into account accessibility and AGPAI's willingness to provide space for a research process that required intensive interaction.

Informants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, with the criteria being individuals who possessed in-depth knowledge and direct experience related to AGPAI's role in issues of religious education and democracy. A total of twelve informants were involved, consisting of AGPAI central board members, regional board members, and active teacher members. Central board members were chosen because they hold strategic roles in formulating the organization's vision, policies, and advocacy direction. Regional board members were selected to provide perspectives on the implementation of policies and programs at the local level, while teacher members were chosen to understand how AGPAI's policies and narratives are internalized and enacted in the classroom. This number of informants was deemed adequate to provide a sufficiently broad range of viewpoints while still allowing for intensive data exploration.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were used to explore informants' views, experiences, and explanations in detail, allowing the researcher to follow their narratives and examine aspects that might not emerge in structured questions. Participant observation was carried out by attending various AGPAI activities such as seminars, training sessions, work meetings, and policy advocacy forums. This technique was chosen because it allows the researcher to directly observe social interactions, communication patterns, and organizational practices in their natural context, as suggested by Ames et al. (2019). Document analysis included examining AGPAI's statutes and bylaws, policy recommendation papers, official publications, and social media postings. These documents provided historical context, revealed official narratives, and served as a basis for comparison with data obtained from interviews and observations.

To maintain data validity, this study applied triangulation techniques covering source, method, and time triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from different types of informants—central board members, regional board members, and teacher members—to identify both consistencies and differences in perspectives. Method triangulation was achieved by combining the results of interviews, observations, and document analysis so that the information obtained was not solely dependent on a single data collection technique. Time triangulation was implemented by repeating interviews or observations at different moments to ensure that the data collected was not merely influenced by temporary situations or conditions. As described by Kodithuwakku (2022), this triangulation approach aims to strengthen the reliability of findings by examining the data from multiple angles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

AGPAI as a Hybrid Actor in Islamic Religious Education

The findings show that the Indonesian Association of Islamic Religious Education Teachers (AGPAI) plays a role that goes far beyond its formal function as a professional body for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers. In practice, AGPAI simultaneously combines two main roles: developing its members professionally in terms of pedagogy and PAI content, and advocating public policies oriented toward democratic values and pluralism. This dual position—referred to in the literature as a hybrid civil society actor—enables AGPAI to operate in two strategic arenas at once: the formal education space in schools and the public policy discourse arena (Esposito et al., 2021; Min, 2022).

AGPAI's involvement in policy advocacy is evident from interviews with several central board members. One central board member interviewed (IM) said that they are often invited by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Parliament to provide input on PAI curriculum revisions, the development of religious moderation modules, and policy recommendations to counter intolerance in schools. According to IM, this process is not only formal in nature but also requires diplomatic skills to present the organization's views in an argumentative way without triggering resistance from those with different perspectives. Meanwhile, a regional board member in one province (AS) revealed that AGPAI at the local level is also active in advocating educational policies at provincial and district levels, for instance by proposing revisions to local regulations considered insufficiently sensitive to religious diversity.

Field observations of several AGPAI activities reinforce this finding. In a national working meeting attended by central and regional board members and teacher representatives, the agenda discussed went beyond issues of teaching competence or learning evaluation to include advocacy strategies for a proposed new curriculum. In one session, a central board member presented the results of their meeting with ministry officials while encouraging meeting participants to prepare written feedback to be brought to the next official forum. The meeting room atmosphere reflected a formal yet dynamic tone: at small tables, participants engaged in intense discussions about the precise wording to use in recommendations, ensuring the message strongly supported democratic values while remaining rooted in Islamic teachings.

In addition to advocacy, AGPAI is active in the professional development of its members. In one PAI teacher training observed by the researcher, the topic was "Strengthening Character Education Based on Religious Moderation." The activity used participatory learning methods, in which participants not only discussed teaching materials but also designed learning strategies to help students see differences as a blessing. Interestingly, in the closing session, the facilitator inserted a brief discussion on the importance of education policies that support an inclusive approach. This shows that even in a forum designed for pedagogical purposes, there was also a political dimension in the form of awareness-raising about public policy.

Interviews with teacher members reinforce this picture. One teacher (NH) admitted that she initially joined AGPAI to improve her teaching skills, but over time realized that the

organization also shaped her views on national and democratic issues. NH noted that AGPAI's training materials often linked Qur'anic verses or hadith to principles of social justice, equality, and freedom of expression, which were then related to the realities of democratic life in Indonesia. This process fostered the understanding that being a PAI teacher is not only about teaching religious material but also about educating students to become citizens who respect diversity.

The combination of professional and political roles carried out by AGPAI aligns with Min's (2022) concept of hybrid civil society actors, where an organization combines functions usually separated in the social sphere. In many cases, civil society organizations tend to focus on one primary function, such as social services, advocacy, or capacity building. However, AGPAI demonstrates that these functions can be integrated into a single mutually reinforcing strategy. By equipping its members with strong professional competence, AGPAI builds credibility as a legitimate voice in policy discourse. Conversely, by actively engaging in policy advocacy, AGPAI extends the reach of PAI teacher professionalism to the level of the national education system.

Observation of one public advocacy activity also provides a concrete picture of how this dual role is carried out. In a national seminar on "Democracy, Religious Education, and the Challenge of Intolerance," AGPAI leaders appeared as speakers alongside state university academics and government officials. The AGPAI presentation combined explanations of inclusive teaching practices in classrooms with constructive criticism of policies deemed insufficient in promoting tolerance. The presentation concluded with a call for cross-sector collaboration to develop a national PAI learning guideline integrating democratic values. AGPAI's presence in such forums demonstrates its ability to bridge teachers' practical experiences with macro-level policy formulation.

The strength of this hybrid position also lies in its broad reach. On the one hand, AGPAI has legitimacy as a professional association recognized by its members and by government institutions. On the other, it has a socio-political network sufficient to influence policy direction, whether through formal channels such as official meeting invitations or informal channels such as personal communication with relevant officials. This ability to move in both spaces provides strategic flexibility, which is crucial amid rapidly changing political and socio-religious dynamics.

However, this dual role is not without challenges. Some informants acknowledged that certain members feel uncomfortable when AGPAI speaks too frequently on political issues. According to one regional board member (RD), ideological differences among members sometimes spark internal debates over how far AGPAI should be involved in political advocacy. Nonetheless, the organization's leadership strives to maintain balance by framing advocacy messages in inclusive language grounded in moderate Islamic values.

AGPAI, as a hybrid actor, has succeeded in leveraging this dual identity to expand its influence in Islamic religious education in Indonesia. Empirical evidence from interviews, activity observations, and document reviews shows that professional and political functions do not operate separately but rather support each other. Through a strategy combining

teacher capacity building and public policy advocacy, AGPAI demonstrates that a teacher association can serve as a bridge between classroom educational practice and broader educational policy, as well as between religious values and democratic norms underpinning a pluralistic country like Indonesia.

Articulation of Democratic and Pluralist Values in AGPAI Discourse

This study finds that AGPAI consistently articulates democratic and pluralist values in its official documents, social media posts, and training materials for PAI teachers. Thematic analysis identified three dominant themes: first, strengthening the concept of inclusive civic Islam, which integrates Islamic principles with democratic civic values; second, valuing diversity as a key element of national life; and third, firmly rejecting intolerance, especially on the basis of religion and identity. These three themes appear not only as rhetoric but are also manifested in training and advocacy programs initiated by AGPAI across Indonesia.

In the policy recommendation documents analyzed, AGPAI frequently places the terms musyawarah (deliberation), justice, and equal rights as moral foundations for building a democratic society. One statement from an AGPAI National Working Meeting, for example, asserted that "Islamic religious education should be a medium for learning national values that prioritize deliberation, social justice, and respect for differences." Such statements, though simple, reflect a systematic effort to bridge religious language with democratic terminology. A central board member explained that this approach is intentional to build a "shared language" acceptable to PAI teachers, policymakers, and the wider public. According to him, the use of universal terms like "justice" or "equal rights" makes their narrative more inclusive without losing Islamic identity.

Field observation at one provincial-level PAI teacher training reinforced this finding. Held in a large government-owned hall with about a hundred teachers from various districts, the opening session began with Qur'anic verses emphasizing brotherhood and equality, followed by an explanation of the importance of citizen participation in the democratic process. The presentation slides combined Qur'anic and hadith quotes, articles from the 1945 Constitution, and data visualizations of intolerance cases in Indonesia. This showed how AGPAI deliberately designed training materials to link democratic principles with Islamic teachings, enabling participants to see them as part of a unified set of values rather than conflicting concepts.

On social media, AGPAI uses platforms like Facebook and Instagram to spread messages of tolerance. For instance, on International Tolerance Day, AGPAI's official account posted photos of PAI teachers from different regions holding posters reading "Islam Rahmatan lil 'Alamin: Respecting Differences, Preserving Unity." The accompanying caption emphasized that PAI teachers have a moral responsibility to guide students to be active, tolerant, and open-minded citizens. A regional board member noted that such posts receive positive responses from teachers and the public, although there are also critical comments from conservative groups. This indicates AGPAI's awareness of the risk of resistance, yet its commitment to promoting democratic narratives remains steadfast.

Discourse analysis shows that AGPAI employs strategic code-switching—a combination of religious and democratic terms—to broaden the acceptance of its ideas. When addressing teachers and religious figures, they highlight references to classical Islamic texts, but when speaking to the government or in public forums, they stress universal values aligned with democratic principles. This approach aligns with Suryani & Muslim's (2024) concept of democratic education in multicultural societies, where education in diverse societies requires integrating language and values that can be understood by various social groups. Through this linguistic strategy, AGPAI effectively positions itself as a credible bridge between the Muslim community and the public policy sphere.

Interviews with several members suggest that AGPAI's democratic narrative is not just a slogan but rooted in concrete field experiences. A senior teacher in Central Java, for instance, shared that through AGPAI-facilitated training, he began changing his classroom teaching approach by encouraging open discussion and valuing differing student opinions. According to him, this change has increased tolerance among students, especially in schools with religiously diverse backgrounds. This suggests that AGPAI's narrative has practical dimensions that directly influence educational behavior.

From a visual discourse standpoint, AGPAI's training materials also contain symbols rich with inclusive meaning. In one observed training module, there was an infographic depicting a large circle labeled "Islam" surrounded by smaller circles labeled "Democracy," "Equal Rights," "Freedom of Expression," and "Deliberation." This symbol was designed to show that democratic values are not foreign entities but part of Islamic values that can coexist. This observation indicates that AGPAI uses visual framing as a strategy to strengthen the internalization of its message.

Theoretically, AGPAI's articulation pattern can be understood through Wood's (2025) framework, which emphasizes that democratic education in plural societies requires a "dual narrative" capable of integrating cultural identity with universal values. In AGPAI's case, this narrative is realized through language, symbols, and programs that consistently connect Islamic teachings with democracy and pluralism. This strategy not only builds acceptance among PAI teachers but also creates a bridge between the Muslim community and state institutions.

Nonetheless, the study also finds that AGPAI's efforts to articulate democratic and pluralist values face challenges. Some members from conservative backgrounds feel that the use of "democracy" in the PAI context risks "blurring" Islamic identity. Externally, there is also pressure from political groups attempting to steer religious education narratives for electoral purposes. Despite this, AGPAI appears to maintain its commitment to the inclusive principles that have become its organizational identity.

The articulation of democratic and pluralist values in AGPAI's discourse is not merely a communication strategy but a process of narrative transformation designed to integrate religious identity with democratic civic values. This process—occurring through official documents, social media, and teacher training—demonstrates that AGPAI positions itself as an important actor in democratic education within Indonesia's plural society. This approach

reflects the organization's awareness that in the era of pluralism, religious education cannot stand alone but must be part of the national project that values diversity, rejects intolerance, and strengthens democratic participation.

Advocacy Strategies and Responses to Public Issues

The advocacy strategies carried out by the Association of Islamic Religious Education Teachers (AGPAI) in responding to public issues such as intolerance, identity politics, and national curriculum reform show that this organization does not only operate in the realm of professional development for teachers, but also actively engages in the arena of public policy. Based on interviews with several central and regional board members, it was revealed that AGPAI positions itself as a bridge between the aspirations of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers and government policy. A central board member, Hs., explained that AGPAI is routinely invited to policy consultation forums at the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education, particularly when discussing revisions to the PAI curriculum. In these meetings, AGPAI not only provides technical input related to teaching materials, but also emphasizes the importance of an inclusive approach to religious education that is free from politicization. This statement indicates that AGPAI understands policy advocacy not merely as a technical matter, but also as part of the effort to build religious education that aligns with the values of democracy and pluralism.

Field observations at one of AGPAI's National Working Meetings in Yogyakarta showed how such formal forums serve as strategic spaces to formulate positions on public issues. The large meeting room of a hotel was transformed into an arena of intense discussion, with a big screen displaying draft policy recommendations. Participants, consisting of regional and central board members, took turns giving input, while the moderator ensured that all proposals remained within AGPAI's vision. It was clear that the forum did not only discuss internal organizational matters, but also strategies for responding to public discourse, for example, the growing trend of religion-based hate speech on social media. One session was even dedicated to discussing media strategy and public engagement, signaling AGPAI's awareness of public communication as an integral part of advocacy.

An interesting case study was AGPAI's response to an incident of intolerance at a public school in 2023, where a non-Muslim student experienced discrimination in an extracurricular activity. Although the case did not occur in AGPAI's base area, the organization issued an official statement affirming that Islamic religious education must foster respect for differences in belief, not the opposite. The statement was published on AGPAI's official website and social media, using language that combined religious terminology such as ukhuwah insaniyah (human brotherhood) with human rights concepts. The use of these two linguistic spheres shows AGPAI's precision in framing issues so that its message could be accepted by diverse audiences. In an interview, a regional board member, Hn., emphasized that this strategy was deliberately chosen so AGPAI would not be trapped in an exclusive image, but instead present itself as an inclusive and visionary educational actor.

In addition to official statements, AGPAI utilizes social media to build public opinion. AGPAI's official accounts on various platforms actively produce content that is not only

informative—such as announcements of events or training schedules—but also raises relevant public issues. For example, when the government announced plans for national curriculum reform by increasing the portion of digital literacy and reducing religious education hours, AGPAI responded with a series of posts containing analyses of the policy's impact on the quality of PAI learning. The content was designed with simple infographics, relevant Qur'anic verses or Hadith quotes, and concise policy recommendations. Observation of these social media accounts shows that each post received fairly high engagement from PAI teachers, academics, and the general public, indicating that AGPAI's digital strategy is effective in reaching a broad audience.

However, in-depth analysis raises a critical question: to what extent do these strategies actually influence policy change or shift public opinion beyond the PAI teacher community? Referring to Bandelow (2023), successful advocacy often depends on an organization's ability to build cross-sector networks and influence policymakers directly or through public mobilization. In AGPAI's case, such networks do exist, but most are still based on internal relationships among teachers and education bureaucrats. Engagement with broader civil society organizations or cross-issue alliances remains limited. This could be a barrier if AGPAI wants to position itself as an influential actor in a more plural and competitive public space.

On the other hand, AGPAI's strength lies in its moral and professional legitimacy. As an organization representing PAI teachers from various regions, AGPAI has direct access to a wide educational community base. This legitimacy gives them the authority to speak on behalf of thousands of teachers, so that every statement or recommendation they issue carries significant representative weight. In observations of a provincial-level coordination meeting, it was evident that regional boards adopted advocacy materials from the central board and then disseminated them to schools. This pattern creates a ripple effect that broadens the reach of AGPAI's messages, although still within the education sector.

The effectiveness of AGPAI's strategy is also influenced by how they manage sensitive issues such as identity politics. In interviews, Ms., a regional board member, revealed that AGPAI deliberately avoids partisan political language in public forums, even when substantively criticizing certain policies. This approach enables them to be accepted in various circles, including government environments that may have different political affiliations. This strategy aligns with Yi & Yuan's (2023) notion that successful advocacy networks are those capable of maintaining coalitions across political and ideological divides.

Overall, AGPAI has developed an advocacy model that combines three main elements: participation in policy forums, use of social media as an alternative public space, and strengthening the internal capacity of PAI teachers to be agents of change in their respective schools. However, to make this strategy more effective, AGPAI needs to expand its advocacy network beyond the religious education community, for example by partnering with organizations focused on child rights, freedom of religion, or strengthening democracy. In doing so, their message would not only be heard among teachers, but also enter a wider and more diverse public arena.

From a theoretical perspective, AGPAI's practices can be read as a form of adaptation by a policy advocacy network actor operating in a plural society. In line with the concept of policy advocacy networks, AGPAI leverages its position as both a professional representative and a normative agent to influence policy directions (Bandelow, 2023). Despite limitations in external influence, their consistency in articulating positions on public issues has positioned AGPAI as one of the important voices in the debate on Islamic religious education in Indonesia. With strengthened cross-sector networks and more inclusive public communication strategies, AGPAI's advocacy role has the potential to become stronger and more influential in the future.

Internal and External Challenges in Promoting Democratic Values

Promoting democracy and pluralism in the context of Islamic religious education is no simple task for the Association of Islamic Religious Education Teachers of Indonesia (AGPAI). On one hand, the organization has a strong vision to build an inclusive narrative and strengthen tolerance, but on the other hand, it faces various internal and external challenges that often test the consistency of this mission.

Internal challenges mainly stem from the diverse backgrounds of its members. PAI teachers in AGPAI come from various regions, have different social experiences, and bring ideological orientations that do not always align. Interviews with a regional board member revealed that some members are more comfortable with a conservative approach to teaching religion, while others strive to promote more progressive and dialogical methods. These differences sometimes lead to lengthy debates in internal meetings, especially when discussing training materials or the organization's official stance on sensitive public issues.

This situation poses a specific challenge because effective advocacy for democratic values requires a strong shared vision. As Hs. stated, it often takes a long time to reach consensus at the leadership level. Differences in background also influence members' acceptance of the idea of pluralism. On several occasions, some have considered pluralism a concept that is "too Western" and less relevant to the local context, even though AGPAI officially adopts the view that Islam and pluralism can mutually reinforce one another. This shows that internal challenges are not only related to organizational management, but also touch on ideological and epistemological domains.

In addition to internal challenges, AGPAI also faces complex external pressures. One of these is political pressure from groups pushing certain identity-based agendas. In Indonesia's plural yet polarization-prone socio-political context, AGPAI's courage in making statements rejecting intolerance sometimes provokes backlash. A central board member recounted that AGPAI's official stance rejecting discrimination against religious minorities in schools once received strong criticism from parties who viewed such action as a "deviation" from religious teachings. Such pressure, while not directly limiting their movement, creates a psychological atmosphere that makes some members more cautious in voicing their views.

Government regulations are also a limiting external factor. Certain policies related to the Islamic religious education curriculum require approval from government agencies, so AGPAI cannot immediately change or add materials they deem important for teaching

democracy and pluralism. For instance, when AGPAI proposed a teacher training module on multicultural education based on Islamic values, the approval process took a long time due to ministry bureaucracy. Field observations at a PAI teacher training activity in Central Java showed that although tolerance was incorporated into discussion sessions, some facilitators still limited the discussion scope to avoid politically or religiously sensitive issues. This makes mainstreaming democratic values often only possible in a partial manner.

The socio-religious dynamics of communities also pose unique challenges. In some areas with high religious homogeneity, pluralism discourse often receives little appreciation. Observation in a rural high school in East Java, for example, showed that interfaith interactions among students hardly occurred simply because there was no religious diversity in the school. In such contexts, teaching tolerance and pluralism must be done through simulations and case narratives, which are not always as effective as direct experience. These conditions demand creativity from PAI teachers to instill democratic values even in situations with minimal intergroup interaction.

Referring to Roberts et al. (2021), an organization's ability to maintain its mission under pressure is determined by strategic flexibility, network strength, and internal cohesion. In AGPAI's case, internal challenges such as ideological differences among members can reduce cohesion, while external challenges such as political pressure and restrictive regulations require high strategic flexibility. However, interview and observation data show that AGPAI tries to maintain its inclusive vision in two ways: first, by prioritizing musyawarah (deliberation) in decision-making so that all parties feel involved; second, by leveraging collaboration networks with educational organizations and NGOs that share a similar vision. While these strategies have not completely eliminated obstacles, they provide AGPAI with room to continue advocating for democracy and pluralism, at least within the internal PAI teacher community.

Nevertheless, the greatest challenge remains maintaining a consistent democratic narrative when facing strong external pressure. In some cases, AGPAI has chosen to use softer language and avoid explicitly using the term "pluralism," replacing it with "ukhuwah insaniyah" (human brotherhood), which is considered more acceptable to various audiences. This step is indeed effective in reducing resistance, but on the other hand, it risks diluting the normative message they wish to uphold. From Bing et al.'s (2022) perspective, this is a form of tactical adaptation, but it also implies a compromise that could affect the firmness of their mission.

A critical discussion of these findings shows that AGPAI is at a crossroads between firmly maintaining its inclusive vision or adjusting its language and strategy to remain acceptable in a high-pressure environment. The question is whether AGPAI can sustain this vision in the long term. Observations suggest the answer depends on two things: the organization's ability to strengthen internal capacity so that there is a more uniform understanding of democracy and pluralism, and its ability to build strategic alliances with other public actors to expand legitimacy and protection for its mission. In other words, AGPAI's resilience is tested not only by the strength of its opponents, but also by its own

ability to maintain the integrity of its vision amid political, social, and religious tensions (Doolan et al., 2024).

Looking at current trends, AGPAI seems to understand that sustaining democracy and pluralism in the religious education sector is not only about conveying a narrative, but also about how that narrative is protected, expanded, and internalized by its members. The internal and external challenges they face, if managed with the right strategy, could in fact become a source of collective learning that strengthens the organization's resilience. However, if left without capacity building and collaboration efforts, these challenges risk eroding commitment and blurring the direction of their struggle. In this context, the concept of organizational resilience put forward by Edwards becomes relevant as both an analytical framework and a strategic guide for the sustainability of AGPAI's mission.

AGPAI as a Mediator between Religious Values and Democratic Norms

The position of AGPAI (Indonesian Association of Islamic Religious Education Teachers) as a mediator between religious values and democratic norms represents one of the most strategic aspects in the landscape of Islamic religious education in Indonesia. This role stems from the awareness that, on the one hand, Islamic teachings embody moral principles emphasizing justice, consultation (shūrā), and mutual respect, while on the other, democratic norms require the safeguarding of freedom of expression, equality of rights, and respect for pluralism. The integration of these two domains does not occur automatically; rather, it requires a deliberate process of articulation to ensure that religious messages are not diluted in meaning, while democratic norms remain relevant to religious communities.

As noted in an interview with one of AGPAI's central board members, the organization seeks to develop instructional modules that link Qur'anic verses and Hadiths to principles of nationhood, thereby providing Islamic religious education (PAI) teachers with clear references for instilling tolerance without abandoning their theological foundations.

Field observations indicate that these modules are widely used in teacher training programs, particularly in regions with high levels of religious diversity. For example, in a training session held in a coastal city inhabited by Muslim, Christian, and Hindu communities, an AGPAI facilitator presented a case study on intercommunal conflict and encouraged participants to examine it through the lens of Qur'anic injunctions prohibiting religious disparagement. Such training not only addressed cognitive aspects but also invited teachers to share experiences in managing religiously diverse classrooms. In one session, a teacher recounted facing challenges when students used stereotypical language about other faiths. Through AGPAI's approach, the teacher learned to transform the situation into a constructive classroom dialogue that fostered mutual understanding.

From the perspective of norm entrepreneurship theory (Bruder, 2021; Wijayati et al., 2021), AGPAI can be understood as an actor introducing new norms into the Islamic religious education system. In this context, the "new" norm involves translating principles of tolerance and democratic pluralism into theologically legitimate language. This strategy is significant because in religious societies, moral legitimacy often determines whether an idea will be accepted. AGPAI leverages this position to produce and disseminate the narrative that fully

practicing one's faith inherently includes maintaining peace, respecting differences, and protecting the rights of all citizens.

This role becomes particularly visible when AGPAI responds to incidents of intolerance in schools. In several cases, the organization not only issued formal statements but also deployed facilitator teams to provide direct coaching to teachers in affected schools. According to an interview with an informant identified as M.S., this approach proved more effective than issuing written appeals alone, as teachers receiving direct mentorship tended to feel more confident in managing classroom diversity. M.S. emphasized that AGPAI's interventions always begin by identifying common ground between religious teachings and national values, ensuring that teachers do not perceive these concepts as externally imposed.

Observations of such activities revealed a dynamic training atmosphere in which participants actively discussed the material in relation to their local contexts. In one secondary school located in an area with a history of interreligious tensions, for example, training sessions focused on reading religious texts that emphasize human brotherhood. Teachers were trained to design project-based learning activities that encouraged students from different religious backgrounds to work collaboratively. As a result, teachers reported noticeable improvements in interstudent relations, although challenges related to stereotypes and prejudice persisted.

The potential impact of AGPAI's mediating role on younger generations is significant. Students exposed to this approach to PAI not only acquire religious knowledge but also essential social skills for functioning in a democratic society. Values such as openness to dialogue, respect for differences, and the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully become part of their learning experience. Some teachers even reported that students carried these perspectives beyond the classroom, initiating interfaith activities within their communities. These findings reinforce the argument that integrating religious values and democratic norms in the classroom can contribute meaningfully to strengthening social cohesion at the grassroots level.

Nonetheless, this potential is not without obstacles. In practice, AGPAI must navigate resistance from segments of society—and occasionally even from teachers—who view democracy as a "foreign" or "secular" concept. Here, the mediating role becomes crucial, as AGPAI must continuously construct narratives demonstrating the compatibility of democratic principles with Islamic teachings. This strategy requires patience, consistency, and mastery of both religious and civic discourse. A conceptual analysis of AGPAI's role within the framework of norm entrepreneurship suggests that its success depends on three factors: moral credibility, collaborative networks, and narrative adaptability. Moral credibility is grounded in AGPAI's reputation as a professional organization attuned to the needs of PAI teachers. Collaborative networks include partnerships with government agencies, NGOs, and interfaith communities, which broaden the reach of its advocacy. Narrative adaptability is evident in how AGPAI tailors its approaches to local contexts—for instance, emphasizing consultation (musyawarah) in areas with strong customary traditions, or highlighting social justice in regions marked by economic inequality.

Ultimately, AGPAI's strategic position as a bridge between religious values and democratic norms holds relevance not only for PAI teachers but also for the broader future of education and social cohesion in Indonesia. By framing democratic values within a religious paradigm, AGPAI opens the possibility for a generation that sees no contradiction between being devout Muslims and democratic citizens. In a socio-political climate prone to polarization, this role becomes increasingly vital. Observations from various training programs suggest that teachers equipped with this perspective often emerge as change agents capable of inspiring students to coexist peacefully.

From a long-term perspective, AGPAI's role could evolve from that of a mediator to that of a value producer in religious education, shaping the identity formation of future generations. At this stage, its vision as a norm entrepreneur would find its fullest expression—combining the moral legitimacy of religion with a commitment to national and democratic values. As noted by Ehrig & Foss (2022) and Ranville & Barros (2022), actors who successfully introduce new norms do not merely create discourse but ensure that these norms are embedded in social practice. In this regard, AGPAI has initiated such a process in the classroom, the primary arena where a democratic culture grounded in religious morality can begin to take root.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that AGPAI occupies a strategic position as an effective mediator between Islamic religious values and democratic norms within Indonesia's plural society. By combining its role as a professional association and an advocacy entity, AGPAI has been able to construct an inclusive "civic Islam" narrative that fuses the moral legitimacy of religious teachings with the principles of nationhood and democracy. The findings indicate that despite internal challenges—such as the ideological diversity of its members—and external pressures from political, regulatory, and socio-religious dynamics, AGPAI has remained consistent in promoting pluralism and tolerance in religious education. Its approach—integrating policy advocacy, developing religious text-based tolerance teaching materials, and mentoring teachers as socio-political agents of education—underscores its role as a norm entrepreneur that introduces and institutionalizes democratic norms within the practice of religious education. The novelty of this research lies in shifting the analytical focus from students and curricula to the political agency of the teachers' association, which has demonstrated its capacity to influence the orientation of religious education policy toward the vision of a democratic and plural society.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected

through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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