

NARRATIVE POLITICS AND THE LIMITS OF RELIGIOUS GOVERNANCE IN DECENTRALIZED INDONESIA: THE CASE OF HKBP MARANATHA IN CILEGON, INDONESIA

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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.31330/penamas.v38i1.830>

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Dates:

Received: October, 18th 2024

Revised: May, 2nd 2025

Published: June, 30th 2025



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Abstract

Religion continues to be a critical domain in Indonesian public life, but its governance remains fraught with contestation, especially at the local level. This study analyzes how dominant and counter-narratives influence the implementation of religious pluralism policies in Indonesia, focusing on the conflict surrounding the HKBP Maranatha Church in Cilegon. Applying the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), it maps how policy actors construct, reinforce, and contest narratives surrounding the enforcement of Joint Regulation No. 9/8 of 2006. The findings show that historical, legal-administrative, and human rights narratives compete to frame the conflict, with exclusionary narratives dominating through outdated decrees, social pressure, and policy ambiguity. In contrast, counter-narratives advanced by civil society and minority groups seek recognition and justice. The study reveals that legal vagueness and weak national oversight enable institutionalized discrimination. It recommends regulatory revision, institutional strengthening, and the cultivation of inclusive narratives to promote equitable religious governance. The study's limitations include its localized and temporal focus, suggesting the need for comparative or longitudinal research in future studies across different regions. This research contributes conceptually to narrative-based policy studies and empirically to religious governance debates in plural societies.

Keywords: Narrative Policy Framework, Religious Tolerance, Local Narratives, Policy Enforcement

Abstrak

Agama merupakan ranah krusial dalam kehidupan publik di Indonesia, namun pengaturannya masih sering menghadirkan kontestasi, terutama di tingkat lokal. Studi ini menganalisis bagaimana narasi dominan dan narasi alternatif memengaruhi implementasi kebijakan keagamaan di Indonesia, dengan fokus pada konflik seputar Gereja HKBP Maranatha di Kota Cilegon. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), penelitian ini memetakan bagaimana aktor kebijakan membentuk, memperkuat, dan mempertentangkan narasi dalam pelaksanaan Peraturan Bersama Menteri Agama dan Menteri Dalam Negeri No. 9/8 Tahun 2006. Hasil temuan menunjukkan bahwa narasi sejarah, legal-administratif, dan hak asasi manusia bersaing dalam membingkai konflik, di mana narasi eksklusif lebih dominan melalui dekrit lama, tekanan sosial, dan ambiguitas kebijakan. Sebaliknya, narasi alternatif yang diajukan oleh kelompok minoritas dan elemen masyarakat sipil menuntut pengakuan dan keadilan. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa lemahnya pengawasan nasional dan kaburnya regulasi memungkinkan terjadinya diskriminasi yang terinstitusionalisasi. Studi ini merekomendasikan revisi regulasi, penguatan institusional, dan pembangunan narasi inklusif untuk mendukung tata kelola keberagaman yang adil. Keterbatasan studi ini terletak pada fokus lokal dan temporal, sehingga disarankan riset komparatif dan longitudinal untuk masa mendatang.

Kata Kunci: Narrative Policy Framework, Toleransi Beragama, Narasi Lokal, Penegakan Kebijakan

INTRODUCTION

Religion and belief play an essential role in human life, providing moral guidance and fostering social cohesion (Van Der Burg and De Been 2020; Hakim, Qurbani, and Wahid 2023; Ishak and Manitra 2022; Subedi, Brasted, von Strokirch, et al. 2024). The role of religion in shaping human perspectives has been widely studied, including on religion and gender (Boland 2021; Ishak and Manitra 2022), minority beliefs and justice (Al-Kohlani, Campbell, and El-Khatib 2023). Given its deep integration into human life, religion is recognized as a fundamental human right, leading to various discussions on its incorporation into legal frameworks in multiple countries (Dube 2021; Ishak and Manitra 2022; Safran 2023; Song 2020). In Indonesia, religious considerations have played a role in legal decision-making, notably with the implementation of sharia law in Aceh Province (Rahman 2022; Schenk 2019).

Indonesia's demographic diversity further complicates religious governance. The 2021 census recorded a population of 273.32 million, with 86.93% identifying as Muslim, 10.55% as Christian (7.47% Protestant, 3.08% Catholic), 1.71% as Hindu, 0.74% as Buddhist, 0.05% as Confucian, and 0.03% adhering to other religions (Kemendagri 2021; Kenny et al. 2023). The religious composition of Indonesia has sparked discussions on Islam's development in the country, including the role of houses of worship in civic engagement (Lussier 2019), the politicization of religion (Sembiring et al. 2023; Shukri and Smajljaj 2020), and the future trajectory of Islam (Al Qurtuby 2020). In Indonesia, tolerance is a central issue in interfaith relations (Subchi et al. 2022), social transformation (Van Der Burg and De Been 2020), and religious harmony discourses (Hakim et al. 2023; Rahmat and Yahya 2022; Saputra, Hardi, and Rahmat 2023). Pluralism itself is deeply tied to tolerance, which scholars consider the cornerstone of liberal democracy (Cohen 2004; Kuah, Kim, and Le Queux 2021; Yusuf, Shidiq, and Hariyadi 2020).

A house of worship is an integral aspect of religious practice, necessitating government regulation to maintain order (Indainanto et al. 2023; Pauha and Konttori 2020; Safran 2023). To manage the establishment of places of worship, the Indonesian government introduced the Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religion and the Minister of Home Affairs No. 9/8 of 2006 (PBM No. 9/8 of 2006), which serves as a guideline for local governments in regulating religious harmony and facilitating the establishment of houses of worship.

However, conflicts regarding the construction of places of worship persist. One notable case is the opposition to non-Muslim places of worship in Cilegon, Banten Province (Munawaroh and Kudus 2023; Riansyah et al. 2021; Saputra et al. 2023). These disputes raise concerns about religious tolerance and how the state maintains harmony within a legal framework (Indainanto et al. 2023; Nurman, Yusriadi, and Hamim 2022; Subchi et al. 2022). While PBM No. 9/8 of 2006 was designed to ensure fair religious governance, its implementation has been criticized for limiting religious freedom (Ishak and Manitra 2022).

Notably, few studies analyze social conflicts within religious policy from a narrative perspective. The role of narrative is crucial in understanding motivations, perceptions, and public sentiment (Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan 2014; Schlauffer et al. 2022; Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018). In the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), stories carry significant meaning in defining policy implementation and outcomes (Schlauffer et al. 2022; Weible 2018). The success of public policy is often determined by how well real-world practices align with established regulations (Schlauffer et al. 2022). Drawing on the literature review, this study engages three interconnected bodies of scholarship: (1) religious policy and legal frameworks, (2) pluralism, tolerance, and contestation surrounding worship spaces, and (3) the NPF in public policy analysis.

First, studies on religious governance and legal regulation explore how states navigate the intersection of religion, policy, and law. Research from Malaysia and Zimbabwe illustrates how religious frameworks influence public policy and how legal systems can reinforce dominant religious ideologies (Dube 2021; Khalli, Sintang, and Kamu 2022; Rahman and Shapie 2023). In Indonesia, such regulation is shaped by demographic diversity and regional dynamics, exemplified by Aceh's formal adoption of sharia law (Rahman 2022). More broadly, Indonesia's

regulatory context includes PBM 9/8/2006, which governs the establishment of worship sites but remains contentious in practice (Indainanto et al. 2023; Pauha and Konttori 2020; Safran 2023).

Second, studies highlight that religious tolerance is fundamental to democratic governance and social cohesion, often framed as a core liberal principle (Cohen 2004), and explored in relation to interfaith relations, identity politics, and plural societies (Hakim et al. 2023; Kuah et al. 2021; Rahmat and Yahya 2022; Subchi et al. 2022; Yusuf et al. 2020). In Indonesia, and notably in Cilegon, tolerance is undermined by majoritarian sentiment and sociocultural resistance to minority faiths (Munawaroh and Kudus 2023; Riansyah et al. 2021; Saputra et al. 2023), with research showing that opposition is often rooted in historical memory, informal pacts, and outdated regulations (Awang, Ramli, and Rahman 2021; Hoon 2017).

Third, the establishment of worship sites is also a socio-political one, where narratives, administrative discretion, and spatial governance intersect. Global research has shown how bureaucratic and legal hurdles can impede religious minorities from establishing places of worship (Hoon 2017; Pauha and Konttori 2020). In Indonesia, Lussier (2019) highlights how worship sites can serve as spaces of civic engagement, yet state responses remain shaped by populist sentiment and informal pressures (Ismail et al. 2020; Subedi, Brasted, Strokirch, et al. 2024).

To interpret the contestation surrounding religious policy enforcement, this study employs the NPF, which conceptualizes public policy as shaped by competing narratives that define characters, plotlines, and moral evaluations (Jones et al. 2014; Schlauffer et al. 2022; Shanahan et al. 2018). The NPF has been applied across policy domains such as climate change, security, and administrative reform (Bahtiar and Munandar 2021; Crow and Jones 2018). In Indonesia, however, its application remains limited, particularly in the realm of religious governance.

To structure this research, the study operationalizes NPF across three levels as summarized below:

Table 1.
NPF Three-Level Analysis

	<i>Micro</i>	<i>Meso</i>	<i>Macro</i>
Unit of Analysis	Individual	Stakeholders & Civil organization	Institutions & culture
Variable	Policy interpretation, characters, and plot	Policy interpretation, characters, and plot	Policy interpretation, characters, and plot
Methods and Analysis	Interviews	Content analysis, interviews	Data triangulation document review
Potential data	Transcription & observations	Digital media (policy texts, news), transcripts, observations	Documents, archives, secondary data

Source: (Shanahan et al. 2018)

By integrating these levels, this study aims to provide a multidimensional understanding of how religious policy narratives are constructed, circulated, and institutionalized within the context of Cilegon's worship site conflicts. Applying the NPF, this research addresses the gap by *examining how dominant and competing narratives shape the implementation of religious governance in a socially homogeneous yet constitutionally pluralistic setting*. It analyzes narrative contestation across micro (individual), meso (community and civil society), and macro (institutional) levels, with the prolonged case of the HKBP Maranatha Church in Cilegon serving as a focal point. The objective is to explore how policy narratives evolve and how they contribute to either enabling or constraining religious pluralism.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine how competing narratives influence the implementation of PBM No. 9/8 of 2006 in Cilegon City (Gray and Jones 2016; Kuhlmann and Blum 2021; Terlizzi 2021). The selection of Cilegon as a research site is based on the sustained controversy surrounding the construction of non-Muslim places of worship, which makes it a compelling case for analyzing religious governance in a plural society.

This study conducted interviews with 27 informants representing three categories of policy actors: (1) policy-makers, comprising national and local government officials and legislators; (2) policy implementers, such as local bureaucracy and interfaith coordination bodies; and (3) civil society actors, including religious leaders, community organizers, and ordinary citizens. These informants were selected based on their direct involvement, institutional authority, or active participation in shaping public discourse and decision-making regarding the church construction issue.

Table 2.
Key Informants

No	Background	Role	Number
Policymaking Actors			
1	Ministry of Religious Affairs RI	Minister of Religious Affairs	1
2	Ministry of Home Affairs RI	Director General of Politics and General Governance (KUB & PK)	1
3	Central Government Representative	Head of the Kesbangpol Agency, Cilegon City	1
Policy Implementation Actors			
4	Cilegon Legislative Official	Chair of the Cilegon DPRD	1
5	Cilegon Government Official	Regional Secretary of Cilegon City	1
6	Cilegon Government Official	Head of Kesbangpol Cilegon City	1
7	Religious Authority	Chair of the FKUB Forum, Cilegon City	1
8	Serang Legislative Official	Member of the Serang DPRD	1
9	Serang Government Official	Regional Secretary of Serang District	1
10	Serang Government Official	Head of Kesbangpol Serang District	1
11	Cilegon Structural Official	Camat (Subdistrict Head)	2
12	Cilegon Structural Official	Lurah (Village Head)	2
Community Elements			
13	Organization Leader (Islam)	Gerakan Bersama Anti Kemaksiatan/GE BRAK	1
14	Organization Leader (Islam)	Masyarakat Banten Bersatu/MBB	1
15	Religious Leader (Islam)	Al-Khairiyah Islamic Boarding School (Pesantren Al-Khairiyah)	1
16	Religious Leader (Christian)	Huria Kristen Batak Protestan	2
17	Religious Leader (Christian)	GKI Serang Church Leader	1
18	Religious Leader (Catholics)	Paroki St. Mikael Cilegon Actor	1
19	Religious Leader (Hinduism)	Hindu Religious Leader	1
20	Religious Leader (Buddhism)	Buddhist Religious Forum Leader	1
21	Local Elites	Neighborhood/Community Leader (RT/RW)	2
22	Local Citizens	Citangkil People	2
Total			27 people

Data collection methods include semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Interviews explored how actors interpret PBM No. 9/8 of 2006 and position themselves and others in narrative roles (Bailey et al. 2022; Gray and Jones 2016), while observations aimed to capture how narratives circulate in social interactions. Document analysis encompassed relevant media coverage and archival materials to justify or challenge church construction. All data were then analyzed thematically through the lens of the NPF, with triangulation employed to compare narrative claims across sources and actors, thereby strengthening interpretive reliability.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Context and Policy Tensions

Cilegon City, located in Banten Province, is home to a diverse population with varying religious backgrounds and traditions (Fithoroini 2020). As an industrial hub, Cilegon has experienced rapid infrastructure development, attracting people from different regions and contributing to its demographic diversity.

As shown in the tables below (Table 3.), the religious demographics of Cilegon reveal a predominantly Muslim population, alongside smaller communities of Christians, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians (Inayati, Solihah, and Utami 2023).

Table 3.
Number of Population by Regency/City and Religion adhered to in Banten Province in 2023

Regency/City	Islam	Christians	Catholics	Hinduism	Buddhism	Khonghucu
Pandeglang Regency	127.916	712	186	21	262	6
Lebak Regency	1.429.534	2.014	1.011	150	1	16
Tangerang Regency	3.101.768	105.209	44.533	1.959	54.887	763
Serang Regency	1.390.267	4.216	2.312	762	621	14
Tangerang City	1.682.913	107.617	47.283	2.651	71.236	891
Cilegon City	459.474	7.072	1.885	248	1.688	10
Serang City	617.051	10.015	5.701	722	1.867	14
Tangerang Selatan City	1.207.254	79.850	48.039	3.014	13.168	687
Banten Province	10.016.177	316.705	150.950	9.527	143.730	2.401

(Source: BPS Provinsi Banten, 2024)

The contrast is particularly evident in the distribution of religious facilities, where the city hosts numerous mosques and musholas but lacks an equitable number of Protestant churches, Catholic churches, temples, and viharas, as illustrated below:

Table 4.
Number of Places of Worship by Subdistrict in Cilegon City in 2023

Subdistrict	Mosque	Mushola	Protestant Church	Catholics Church	Temple	Vihara
Ciwandan	64	54	-	-	-	-
Citangkil	91	76	-	-	-	-
Pulomerak	60	63	-	-	-	-
Purwakarta	48	30	-	-	-	-

Grogol	52	46	-	-	-	-
Cilegon	45	28	-	-	-	-
Jombang	49	75	-	-	-	-
Cibeber	83	89	-	-	-	-
Cilegon City	492	461	-	-	-	-

(Source: BPS Kota Cilegon, 2024)

Despite the overall absence of formal worship sites, interviews with Rudi, a Buddhist elder in Cilegon, noted that religious life for minority groups has generally been “peaceful and respectful.” Similarly, Catholic and Hindu leaders explained that their religious practices often rely on informal or mobile arrangements. “We worship in former school halls or homes,” said Yohanes Sudarsono, a Catholic lay leader, who added that the lack of visible religious symbols “helps maintain social harmony” (Interview, January 2024). The following figure illustrates Banten’s position relative to other provinces in terms of religious harmony, providing essential context for understanding local tensions:

According to the Religious Harmony Index conducted by Ministry of Religion of Indonesia (2018) shown above, Banten ranks 30th out of 34 provinces, highlighting persistent conflicts over religious diversity. These low-ranking underscores not only the fragility of interfaith relations in the province but also the enduring institutional and societal challenges that hinder the realization of religious tolerance in practice.

Narrative Construction in the HKBP Maranatha Dispute

The case of HKBP Maranatha Cilegon exemplifies the complexities of implementing PBM No. 9/8 of 2006 in a contested religious landscape. Institutionally, HKBP Maranatha has been present in Cilegon since 1997, based on Decree No. 1524/D8/SK-IV/VI/1997, issued by the HKBP District VIII Java-Kalimantan Authority. The congregation, numbering over 3,900 members (as shown on table 5.), has been struggling for more than a decade to establish a permanent place of worship.

Table 5.
Composition of the HKBP Maranatha Cilegon Congregation, December 2021

No	Category	Number of People		
		Male	Female	M+F
1	Children	459	507	966
2	Youth-Teenager	590	536	1.126
3	Parent-Elder	870	941	1.811
Total		1.919	1.987	3.903

(Source: HKBP Maranatha document, 2024)

Despite submitting permit applications in 2011, the Cilegon local government formally rejected the request through an official statement issued by the Head of Gerem Village on April 25, 2011. As a result, the congregation has been conducting mobile worship services, shifting between members' homes and rented buildings. Those with greater financial resources often travel to Serang City, covering distances between 12 to 42 kilometers to attend religious services.

In 2022, the HKBP Maranatha congregation again sought approval to build a church in Gerem Village, Grogol District, but encountered strong public resistance and administrative obstacles. Tensions heightened when the Church Construction Committee held a stone-laying ceremony without formal authorization, triggering protests and intervention by security forces under PBM No. 9/8 of 2006, which mandated further verification. Efforts to validate community signatures—a key approval requirement—then faltered as many residents withdrew support, claiming they had mistakenly signed what they believed were financial aid forms, shrinking valid endorsements from 70 to just 7. Amid escalating disputes, the case proceeded to the Serang

District Court (Case No. 151/Pdt.G/2022/PN Srg), involving the Minister of Religion, HKBP Maranatha, the Cilegon City Government, and the FKUB. This legal battle underscores how narratives of religious conflict become institutionalized, turning policy enforcement into a stage for broader political and ideological contests.

By applying the NPF, this study identifies three dominant narratives driving the policy conflict in Cilegon. The historical narrative links present-day opposition to the 1888 Geger Cilegon Rebellion, casting Christian expansion as a continuation of past foreign influence. The legal-administrative narrative hinges on the obsolete Regent of Serang's Decree No. 189/Huk/SK/1975, which prohibits church construction outside Serang City, despite Cilegon's later administrative autonomy. In contrast, the human rights narrative underscores the selective application of PBM No. 9/8 of 2006 to restrict religious minorities, prompting strong criticism from NGO like Setara Institute.

Dominant Narratives and Policy Contestations

This case exemplifies how multiple narratives shape policy enforcement, reinforcing structural barriers to religious freedom in Indonesia. Furthermore, these narratives are analyzed as operating across three analytical levels, in line with the NPF model:

Based on the picture it is evident that although PBM No. 9/8 of 2006 was intended to regulate and facilitate the establishment of places of worship, its enforcement encounters substantial socio-political resistance and bureaucratic obstacles. The regulation itself sets out procedural provisions, such as community support requirements (Articles 13-17), temporary permits (Articles 18-20), and mechanisms for dispute resolution (Articles 21-22). Yet, local opposition has repeatedly hindered its implementation. Since 1995, at least ten major demonstrations have called for the closure of Christian worship sites in Cilegon, highlighting the enduring nature of religious tensions in the region.

The policy conflict surrounding the HKBP Maranatha Church in Cilegon operates at three levels. At the micro level, individual actors, including local religious leaders and policy-makers, shape the discourse by aligning with dominant community sentiments. At the meso level, civil organizations, religious forums, and local government agencies amplify these narratives through media, protests, and policymaking. At the macro level, broader institutional and cultural frameworks, including historical grievances and national political discourses, reinforce exclusionary policies.

Two key factors drive the policy dispute. First, narrative reinforcement by local leaders sustains opposition to the church's construction. Religious and civic leaders frequently reference historical grievances, framing the issue as resistance to external religious influence. The 1975 Regent Decree, despite being legally obsolete, continues to be cited as a justification for restrictions. Local leaders also invoke long-standing community memories to reinforce these legal positions. "The 1975 Decree, along with the historical agreement between Al-Khairiyah and PT Krakatau Steel, forms part of the collective wisdom passed down across generations," said KH Enting Ali Abdul Karim, a community leader from Serang-Cilegon (Interview, January 2024).

Second, policy ambiguity and localized power structures enable discretionary decision-making, institutionalizing religious discrimination. These discretionary decisions are often justified in terms of pragmatic local governance. "Yes, the church fulfilled many requirements, but we also had to consider the possibility of unrest," said Camat Burhanuddin, who oversees the area near the St. Mikael Catholic community (Interview, January 2024). In light of this, the flexibility of PBM No. 9/8 of 2006 allows local governments to exercise significant autonomy in approving or rejecting religious site applications.

Counter-Narratives and the Struggle for Recognition

Counter-narratives have emerged as minority groups and civil society organizations seek recognition and challenge the exclusionary norms embedded in dominant narratives. In the case of HKBP Maranatha, these alternative voices gained national traction through widespread media coverage, public debate, and legal advocacy. While national outlets largely framed the

conflict around religious intolerance and constitutional rights, local media often reinforced historical and legal-administrative perspectives, depicting the church as a cultural threat and emphasizing procedural violations. This illustrates how the media not only mirrors but also actively shapes the contested narrative landscape, as depicted below (Table 6. and Table 7.).

Table 6.

List of Titles and News Related to HKBP Maranatha Cilegon

No	Title	Media	Publication Time	Informants quoted
1	Detailed Plan for Construction of the HKBP Church in Cilegon City	Kompas.com	20/09/2022	Jamister Manullang (Chair of the HKBP Maranatha Cilegon Church Construction Committee)
2	Cilegon and the Church that Never Existed at Christmas	CNNIndonesia.com	24/12/2022	Hotman Marbun (Leader of the HKBP Maranatha Cilegon Congregation)
3	The construction of the HKBP Church in Cilegon was rejected; residents based it on the 1975 Regent's Decree.	Tribunnews.com	09/09/2022	Marnala Napitupulu (Committee for Construction of the HKBP Maranatha Cilegon House of Worship)
4	Never Giving Up, Christians Fight for the Establishment of the HKBP Maranatha Church in Cilegon	Jawaban.com	21/09/2022	Hotman Marbun
5	HKBP Maranatha Cilegon Congregation has existed for 25 Years, and This is the Press Conference in Front of the Cilegon Mayor's Office	Tren5.com	06/09/2022	Jamister Manullang
6	Church establishment rejected: Congregation waits 15 years, netizens question mayor's move, 'Is this called tolerance?	BBC.com	08/09/2022	Jamister Manullang
7	5 Facts about the Rejection of Church Construction in Cilegon, FKUB Reveals the Reasons	Suara.com	12/09/2022	Jamister Manullang

(Source: Processed by Author, 2024)

Table 7.

News Containing Actors with Positive Sentiments towards HKBP Maranatha Cilegon

No	Title	Media	Publication Time	Informants quoted
1	TAMPAK said that a tragedy has occurred, the action against the construction of the HKBP Maranatha Cilegon Church has damaged religious freedom and diversity	Sinarkeadilan.com	14/09/2022	Roberth Keytimu (Coordinator of the Law Enforcement and Justice Advocate Team (TAMPAK))
2	Ephorus HKBP: Rejection of Church Construction in Cilegon Hurts Hearts, Hoping for IMB Issued Immediately	Liputan6.com	16/09//2022	Pastor Dr Robinson Butarbutar (Ephorus HKBP)

3	YLBHI Notes Regarding Rejection of Church Construction in Cilegon	Hukumonline.com	11/09/2022	Muhamad Isnur (Chairman of YLBHI)
4	Cilegon Rejects Church Construction, UNAIR Human Rights Expert Gives Notes	Unair.ac.id	21/09/2022	Haidar Adam SH LLM (UNAIR Human Rights Expert/ Lecturer at FH Unair)
5	What did the Chancellor of UIN say regarding the rejection of the construction of the HKBP Maranatha Church?	Askara.co	22/12/2022	Wawan Wahyudin (Rector of UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin, Banten)

(Source: Processed by Author, 2024)

The widespread media attention sparked public discourse, drawing support from prominent figures, activists, and religious organizations who defended the HKBP congregation's right to worship. For the congregation, the church represents more than a worship site; it is a symbol of dignity and belonging. "We've waited for decades, moved from house to house, and still our presence is treated as a threat," remarked a church leader (Interview with church leader, December 2024). Their narrative thus extends beyond legal claims, emphasizing equal citizenship and recognition. Open-source searches also reveal a growing positive portrayal of the congregation's struggle, indicating a shift in public sentiment toward greater support.

Human rights bodies and academics have framed this exclusion as a constitutional violation, shifting the narrative from administrative technicalities to systemic discrimination masked by procedure. This perspective is reflected in press releases and legal analyses by Komnas HAM, YLBHI, and UNAIR scholars, who argue for revising policies to prevent the discriminatory use of PBM No. 9/8 of 2006. The mounting public pressure underscores how legal and institutional avenues are being leveraged to challenge exclusionary practices at the local level.

Narrative Convergence and Institutional Limits

Between dominant narratives and their contestations lies a complex interplay of legality, institutional memory, and political pressure that reveals the limits of regulatory frameworks. In Cilegon, rejection of non-Muslim worship sites often hinges on outdated decrees and informal agreements, with the persistence of legal-administrative narratives reinforcing structural barriers to religious freedom. This selective application of historical rules continues to constrain minority rights and hamper broader inclusion efforts. Consequently, bureaucrats are caught between upholding formal law and accommodating local resistance. As a senior FKUB member acknowledged, "The FKUB does not have the power to override social rejection, even when the legal requirements are complete" (Interview with Agus Rahmat, December 2024). Such ambiguity allows institutions to default to vague norms rather than confront entrenched narrative dominance.

The document contains the following provisions:

1. It is not permitted to establish churches and/or conduct prayers for Christian congregations within the jurisdiction of Serang Regency, except in Serang City District.
2. Christian congregations must hold religious gatherings only in pre-existing churches within Serang City.
3. This decree takes effect immediately upon issuance and can be revised if necessary.

Narrative convergence emerges when legal-administrative references merge with cultural memory and historical interpretations. Local officials, FKUB, and even neighborhood associations justify their resistance based on a mix of written and unwritten agreements. "There's no regulation that clearly says 'no church,' but there's understanding," said one local RT leader (Interview with Fahyudi, December 2024). Additionally, Cheng An Hwa, a Buddhist leader from the Banten FKUB, emphasized that even when legal frameworks appear ambiguous, community attitudes can determine the limits of tolerance. "Elite-level discussions often support religious freedom, but at the grassroots, there is still a tendency to reject religious

symbols from outside Islam,” she explained (Interview, January 2024). These unwritten norms are reinforced not only by community leaders but also by senior religious figures. KH Hafidin, affiliated with GEBRAK, stated, “We uphold the wisdom of the past. We tolerate non-Muslim worship—but not formal institutions like churches” (Interview, January 2024).

Beyond outdated legal precedents, opposition to the HKBP Maranatha Church is also linked to a historical agreement between Yayasan Al-Khairiyah and PT Krakatau Steel. However, a closer analysis reveals that this agreement only pertained to the relocation of Al-Khairiyah Central buildings in 1974 and did not contain any provisions restricting church construction (Permana, Rahayu dan Hidayat 2018). Despite this, community leaders have used the agreement to reinforce narratives of religious exclusivity, suggesting that institutional memory and informal agreements play a role in maintaining exclusionary policies.

The persistence of these narratives has direct implications for religious tolerance in Indonesia. Studies indicate that maintaining religious harmony is essential in pluralistic societies (Awang et al. 2021; Ezzy et al. 2020; Hoon 2017; Kuah et al. 2021; Subchi et al. 2022), yet political dynamics at the local level often hinder its realization (Farkhani, Baidhaw, and Kuswaya 2021). At the institutional level, this ambiguity has paralyzed progressive actors within the bureaucracy. “Even if we want to support [the church], there’s no political will above us to back it,” a municipal civil servant reflected (Interview with Hartono and Sri Widayati, December 2024). The result is a governance vacuum where regulation exists, but political protection for minority rights does not. The Cilegon case exemplifies how local narratives override national legal frameworks, as demonstrated by the city’s consistently low ranking on the Setara Institute’s Tolerant Cities Index below:

Table 8.
10 Cities with Lowest Score on Tolerant Cities Index 2022

Rangking	Kota	Ind 1	Ind 2	Ind 3	Ind 4	Ind 5	Ind 6	Ind 7	Ind 8	Skor Akhir
85	Prabumulih	2,00	6,55	6,50	4,00	4,00	3,00	3,00	3,00	4,510
86	Lhokseumawe	2,83	5,55	6,50	4,00	4,00	4,00	2,00	3,00	4,493
87	Pariaman	2,00	7,00	7,00	3,00	3,00	3,00	2,00	3,00	4,450
88	Medan	3,50	6,85	4,00	4,00	4,00	4,00	4,00	3,00	4,420
89	Banda Aceh	2,83	5,80	6,50	2,00	3,00	5,00	2,00	3,00	4,393
90	Mataram	3,67	5,85	6,00	3,00	3,00	4,00	3,00	3,00	4,387
91	Sabang	3,67	6,70	7,00	3,00	2,00	2,00	3,00	2,00	4,257
92	Padang	3,50	5,05	6,00	4,00	2,00	3,00	3,00	3,00	4,060
93	Depok	3,50	4,55	4,00	4,00	3,00	3,00	4,00	2,00	3,610
94	Cilegon	2,67	5,30	4,00	2,00	3,00	2,00	2,00	2,00	3,227

(Source: Setara Institute, 2023)

The findings of this study reveal that policy implementation in Indonesia is deeply influenced by dominant local narratives, often at the expense of religious freedom. While PBM No. 9/8 of 2006 was originally intended to regulate and facilitate religious rights, its application has been selectively enforced to justify exclusionary practices. Local governments, under the pretext of administrative compliance, have strategically leveraged policy ambiguity to impose restrictions that reinforce social hierarchies and limit religious pluralism.

The case of HKBP Maranatha in Cilegon exemplifies how historical grievances, outdated legal precedents, and administrative discretion have been mobilized to sustain religious exclusion. The reliance on old regulations—despite its legal obsolescence—illustrates how selective enforcement of regulations can institutionalize discrimination, a phenomenon also observed in studies on religious governance in other pluralistic societies (Bagir et al. 2020; Pauha and Konttori 2020). Additionally, the persistence of mass mobilization tactics, such as protests and petitions, reflects the role of social pressure in shaping policy enforcement, similar to findings in global research on religious contestation (Safran 2023; Sembiring et al. 2023).

From the perspective of the NPF, this case illustrates the ongoing contestation between dominant exclusionary narratives and emerging counter-narratives advocating for religious inclusivity. The ability of civil society, media, and legal advocacy groups to challenge these dominant narratives will ultimately shape whether Indonesia moves towards greater religious pluralism or remains constrained by localized restrictions. Addressing this issue requires clearer policy definitions, judicial intervention against discriminatory practices, and stronger national oversight to prevent the manipulation of policy narratives for exclusionary purposes. Without such measures, religious freedom in Indonesia will continue to be dictated by localized power dynamics rather than constitutional guarantees.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) is instrumental in analyzing the contestation of religious governance in pluralistic societies such as Indonesia. Through the case of HKBP Maranatha in Cilegon, it reveals how local power dynamics, institutional memory, and policy ambiguity converge to produce exclusionary practices that undermine constitutional guarantees of religious freedom. Rather than being a matter of technical compliance with regulatory procedures, the struggle for a place of worship becomes a symbolic battle over identity, legitimacy, and spatial belonging.

The findings deepen our understanding of policy implementation failures under decentralization, particularly where national legal instruments are filtered through local narratives rooted in historical grievance and cultural assertion. By highlighting the intersection of dominant narratives, counter-narratives, and institutional limits, this study contributes to public policy theory on the role of discourse in shaping governance outcomes. It also affirms that legal frameworks like PBM No. 9/8 of 2006 remain vulnerable to co-optation when enforcement relies heavily on localized discretion without strong oversight mechanisms. Practically, the study reveals that narrative dominance is central to understanding the persistent rejection of non-Muslim places of worship in Cilegon. The inability of institutions such as FKUB and local governments to rise above communal pressure signals the urgent need for systemic recalibration.

To advance religious tolerance and ensure the effective implementation of PBM No. 9/8 of 2006, an integrated strategy must be adopted at national and local levels. First, regulatory clarity is critical. The central government should revise the PBM to eliminate vague provisions, particularly regarding community consent and verification procedures, which have been weaponized to obstruct religious minorities. This revision must be followed by the creation of a national supervisory mechanism to monitor compliance and enforce constitutional protections. Second, outdated legal instruments must be officially annulled through ministerial or judicial review. The judiciary should be encouraged to adopt a more proactive stance in defending religious freedom and correcting inconsistent local practices. Third, interfaith forums should be empowered not only as advisory bodies but as mediators of inclusive governance. Finally, fostering inclusive narratives is essential. National leaders, educators, and civil society actors must invest in long-term public dialogue, education, and cultural campaigns to dismantle deeply rooted fears of religious otherness. Only by confronting the narrative roots of exclusion can Indonesia move toward a pluralistic polity where legal rights translate into lived realities for all religious communities.

However, this research is not without limitations. The analysis is bounded by a single case study and temporal frame, focusing predominantly on one religious conflict in Cilegon without incorporating broader comparative contexts or longitudinal data. Moreover, while the narrative analysis draws from interviews, media, and legal documents, the interpretive approach may be limited by the positionality of informants and researcher framing, potentially omitting silent voices within the community, particularly from within the Muslim majority. Future studies could mitigate this by including broader stakeholder perspectives and tracking changes over time.

For future research, several pathways are open. Comparative studies across different cities in

Indonesia can help determine whether the Cilegon case is anomalous or part of a broader pattern of localized resistance to religious pluralism. Longitudinal research could also explore whether counter-narratives gain traction over time and how shifts in legal interpretation, political leadership, or civil society engagement influence policy enforcement. Additionally, further inquiry into the effectiveness of FKUB and similar local bodies could illuminate structural reforms needed to balance community representation with minority rights protection. Through these avenues, scholars may advance the discourse on inclusive governance and the transformative potential of policy narratives in divided societies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research and article were fully self-funded, with no financial support from external parties. The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to M. G. Rum for his valuable contributions in discussing and formulating the ideas that shaped this manuscript.

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