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## Examining the models of religious harmony in anticipating hate polarization in regional head elections in Medan City

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#### Abstract

The issue of religious politicization often arises, considering that religious diversity is often used as a political tool to gain majority support. This article aims to analyze the model of religious harmony in anticipating the polarization of hatred in the Regional Head Election in Medan City. This research uses a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach. The data collection techniques used in this research are Focus Group Discussion and library observation. Data analysis techniques through data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The results show the significant challenges faced by Medan City regarding religious harmony and polarization of hatred in the context of the Regional Head Election. The contradiction between religious activism, local politics, and democratization has triggered the use of religion as a tool to strengthen certain political interests, causing polarization and hostility among voters. Hate speech and the politicization of religion undermine social harmony and the integrity of local democracy. Nonetheless, efforts are made by the Religious Harmony Forum and religious leaders to promote tolerance and interfaith cooperation. The model of religious harmony in this study highlights educational approaches, interfaith dialogue, and the active role of religious leaders and local government. Lessons from history show that interfaith cooperation can build a harmonious society. The contribution of this research in understanding the dynamics of religious harmony in Medan City is important for further development in promoting tolerance and harmony.

**Keywords:** elections, harmony, interfaith hatred, polarization, religious



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### Public Interest Statement

It is crucial to achieve long-term democracy in Medan City by prioritizing religious harmony as the most critical sector. Therefore, a political theology approach is essential to investigate how theological ideas or ways of thinking associated with political beliefs influence society. This method studies the intersection between religion and politics, as well as how religious beliefs can influence political decisions. This study is unique in that it builds a model of religious harmony to predict adversarial polarisation in the Regional Head Election in Medan City. In many ways, this study differs from previous research. This study will investigate how the Religious Harmony Forum socializes tolerance, understanding, respect, and cooperation among religious communities to predict the polarization of hostility in the Regional Head Election in Medan City, which has never been studied before.

### Introduction

Regional Head Election is a political system in Indonesia conducted directly by the residents of the local administrative region. In addition, the Regional Head Election in Indonesia is the election of Governors, Mayors, and Regents, collectively referred to as Regional Heads. The regional head election system in Indonesia aims to give the people the right to elect the regional head directly and democratically (Nasution et al., 2023a). The election of regional heads manifests the principle of regional autonomy, namely the right to the authority to regulate and manage a region itself (Malik et al., 2020). Thus, the regional head aims to carry out government administration to realize the ideals of a more just and prosperous society (Moonti, 2019).

Religious harmony has become a problem in Regional Head Elections in Indonesia. Several cases of regional elections in Indonesia show polarization of voting patterns along religious, ethnic, and geographical lines, troubling Indonesia's multiracial and religious society (Cfr.org, 2019). Candidates have engaged with local ethnic, religious, and community groups through small events, endorsements, and appeals common in local elections. However, regulations to maintain "religious harmony" cannot avoid violence against religious minorities in Indonesia (Harsono, 2020). Religious leaders have also used strategies to become regional heads in Indonesia, which may contribute to the politicization of religion in regional elections (Sudarman & Ubaid, 2021).

Previous studies show that political polarization and hatred have been observed in Indonesian politics, including during the DKI Jakarta regional elections in 2017 (Afrimadona, 2021). Personality dominance, weak partisan identities, and collusive party behavior have been identified as contributing factors to this polarization (Warburton, 2020; Christopher et al., 2024). Social media has also been identified as a platform that can exacerbate religious politicization and spread hate speech (Lim, 2017). The escalation of religious politicization in the Jakarta elections has implications for other regions in Indonesia, including Medan City. With its multicultural society, Medan City has a severe problem with religious politicization in every regional head election. Previous research has shown that political demographics in Medan City during the 2018 North Sumatra Regional Election based on religious and ethnic similarities have implications for political choices, where religious, ethnic, and regional issues become vote-getters to gain power (Mukmin & Damanik, 2018; Nasution et al., 2023b).

Meanwhile, the General Election Supervisory Agency released the 2020 Election Vulnerability Index (IKP), which revealed that Medan City has a high IKP index level 4 with a score of 53.20 (Bawaslu.

go.id, 2020). The Regional Head Election results in Medan City clearly show that religious and ethnic divisions in the 2018 Regional Head Election were very sharp (Primarizki, 2020; Agasi et al., 2017; Aminah et al., 2023). It is essential to realize sustainable democracy in Medan City by prioritizing religious harmony as the leading sector. Therefore, a political theology approach is vital to use by studying how theological concepts or ways of thinking related to political beliefs have an impact on society. It investigates how religion and politics intersect and how religious beliefs can influence political decisions.

Furthermore, this approach is often used in research, such as qualitative studies on political theology for justice (Rantung, 2018), reflections on NU and theological-political theology paradigm (Manshuruddin, 2017), and discussions on the role of the church in political theology (Hutahaean, 2021). This field involves analyzing and arguing politics from a theological perspective to understand its meaning and implications. The problem-solving approach in this research will involve the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) in Medan City, which is a group formed and supported by the government with the aim of building, maintaining, and empowering religious communities for the sake of harmony and community welfare (Fkubkotamedan.or.id, 2023).

This research aims to understand and explain the model of religious harmony that is effective in anticipating polarization and hatred in the Regional Head Election (Regional Head Election) in Medan City, as well as identify the factors that influence religious and ethnic-based political polarization in the context of Regional Head Election in Medan City. In addition, this study evaluates the role of the Medan City Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) in promoting harmony and overcoming religious-based political polarization in the Regional Head Election. In an effort to achieve these objectives, this research also aims to provide a deeper understanding of local political dynamics, provide policy recommendations to strengthen religious harmony and reduce polarization of religion-based politics, contribute new knowledge in political theory and religious studies, and provide an empirical basis for effective policy implementation and intervention strategies. Thus, this research is expected to provide valuable insights for practitioners, academics, and policymakers in maintaining political stability and social harmony at the local level, especially in the context of the implementation of Regional Head Election in Medan City.

## Theoretical Framework

### a. Social Systems Theory

Social systems theory is an interdisciplinary approach that focuses on the impact of various systems, such as family, school, work, religion, and government, on individual behaviour. It recognizes that the whole created by these systems and their interactions is greater than the sum of its parts. The theory was influenced by the work of biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy and later adapted by social psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner, who examined human biological systems in ecological environments (Brandell, 2014). Talcott Parsons' AGIL paradigm is a key concept in social systems theory, which describes the basic conditions for societal survival, including adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency. Social systems theory is not a general theory of society but consists of an understanding of human behaviour and systems that can be applied in practice. Talcott Parsons was the first to formulate a systematic

theory of social systems, defining social systems simply as a segment or subsystem of what he called the theory of action (Tumtavitikul, 2013). In the context of this research, social systems theory can be used to identify the factors that support the creation of interfaith harmony in Medan City and how these factors can be strengthened to overcome the polarization of hatred.

### **b. Pluralism Theory**

Pluralism is a concept that recognizes and respects the diversity of religions and their adherents. According to Karen Armstrong (2013) pluralism is an open-minded attitude that seeks to understand the core teachings of different religions and promotes mutual respect, tolerance, empathy, and active participation to create a situation conducive to peaceful coexistence. Pluralism is not relativism, which considers all religions to be the same, nor is it syncretism, which creates a new religion by combining elements from different religions. Pluralism aims to build not only normative theological awareness but also social awareness, where we live in a pluralistic society in terms of religion, culture, ethnicity, and various other social diversities (Saraswati, 2013).

### **c. Hate Polarization Theory**

Hate polarization theory, as studied by scholars, emphasizes the impact of factors such as political disinformation, hate speech, and affective polarization on societal divisions (Harel et al., 2020). As Vasist et al. (2023) have shown, hate speech contributes to polarization, and it is the prevalence of disinformation that can lead to polarization in society. Affective polarization, which refers to antipathy between citizens based on their group identity, is also an important factor in fueling societal divisions (Harteveld et al., 2021). In addition, Sembiring et al. (2023) showed that the politicization of religion and polarization of hatred in the context of the 2018 North Sumatra regional election was influenced by religious issues that caused social segregation and conflict among the community.

### **d. Hate Polarization Theory**

Religious institutions' role in political theology provides a framework for understanding the intersection of religion and politics. Religious institutions can influence political decisions by promoting specific values and beliefs and providing guidance on how to apply those values in the political realm (Sandal, 2012). They can also act as bridges of interfaith dialogue, helping to promote understanding and cooperation between different religious groups (Kristyanto et al., 2022). The relationship between politics and religion is often conditioned by the kinship between Christianity and Islam (Anshel & Smith, 2014). Religious leaders can play an important role in reconciling divided societies, as seen in a study exploring the role of Muslim religious leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Omerovic, 2017). However, there needs to be more debate about the appropriate level of engagement that religious institutions should have in politics. Polarization over race, religion, and reform has plagued Malaysia for decades and powerfully shaped its electoral politics, jeopardizing inter-ethnic harmony and eroding social cohesion (Welsh, 2020).

The Academy for Cultural Diplomacy lists historical examples of interfaith dialogue as cultural diplomacy (Smith, 2020; Culturaldiplomacy.org, 2023). the importance of interfaith dialogue in encounters between followers of various religions, such as communication between two religious' groups (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2013). An expert has formulated that there will be no peace between religions without dialogue (Swidler & Küng, 2021). So far, previous research has only revealed the government's efforts to restore religious harmony after the conflict. As a result of Qurtuby's research,

Ambon's Christian and Muslim leaders endeavored to work together to combat religious extremism (Al Qurtuby, 2013). Meanwhile, Yussoff's study shows that in post-war religious violence, government authorities are trying to control and foster religious tolerance and harmony in Sri Lanka (Yusoff & Sarjoon, 2019).

This research has a novel aspect in building a model of religious harmony to anticipate the Polarization of hatred in the Regional Head Election in Medan City. Similar research is only obtained from Wafula's study showing the church's role in fostering peace using various methods, especially submission, recognition, and peace visits in encouraging reconciliation in Kenya's 2008-2013 post-election violence (Wafula, 2014). This study differs from previous research in several ways. This study examines how Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama socializes tolerance, mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation between religious communities to anticipate the Polarization of hatred in the Regional Head Election in Medan City, which has never been studied before.

## Methods

This research uses a type of qualitative research with a case study approach. This research method is used to understand a particular phenomenon through a detailed case analysis. This method seeks to understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects, such as behavior, perceptions, interests, motivations, and actions, by describing them in the form of statements (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, researchers describe, interpretation, analyze, and provide projections of religious harmony models to anticipate the polarization of hatred in the Regional Head Election in Medan City. The research was conducted in Medan City, Indonesia, for one year.

Primary data was collected from in-depth stakeholder interviews through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and field observations were conducted to obtain data and information (Ridder, 2017). FGDs allow researchers and informants to interact, resulting in group dynamics for better and more in-depth data collection. There are several stages in conducting FGDs: preparation, recruitment of participants, conducting FGDs, data analysis, presentation of results, and evaluation. In addition, secondary data was obtained by citing books, journals, and online media from reliable sources related to the research case.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) activities will be conducted by inviting stakeholders in the Religious Harmony Forum organization and other stakeholders who are representative enough to answer the research objectives by choosing the organization that has the most significant number of administrators. FGD participants came from the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Medan City, the Indonesian Christian Intelligence Association of North Sumatra Province, the Greater Indonesia Movement Party of North Sumatra, the Indonesian Democracy Network, and North Sumatra political observers. Data analysis techniques include data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Result

**Issues of Religious Harmony and Polarization of Hatred in the Regional Head Election in Medan City**  
Religious harmony and polarization of hatred were seen in the regional head election in Medan City. The contradiction of Islamic activism, local politics, and democratization in Medan City occurred in

the 2010 local elections (Riza & Junaidi, 2019). This finding is reinforced by Aspinall, who shows that religion can trump ethnicity in local elections, as in Medan City (Aspinall et al., 2011). Furthermore, the politicization of religion and polarization of hatred seen in the 2018 North Sumatra regional elections had a direct impact in Medan City through the activities of the morning prayer movement as a political movement (Sembiring et al., 2023; Nasution et al., 2023b). Thus, previous research has shown the configuration of ethnic and religious relations ahead of the 2024 general election in Medan City, where eight incidents of hate speech and hoaxes have been handled by the Regional Police (Fauzan et al., 2024; Regif et al., 2024).

Hate speech in the Regional Head Election in Medan City can be motivated by several factors. According to the Central Executive Board of the Indonesian Christian Scholars Association of North Sumatra Province, Mr. P.D.K.P said:

“Hate speech can occur when internet users have negative prejudices against certain partisan groups, such as the belief that a certain group, religion, or ethnicity is very exclusive. As a result of this prejudice, the group experiences contempt for other groups; consequently, they are always motivated to engage in hate speech. The internet contributes to spreading hate discourse. One can reach a certain point through the internet. Under these conditions, one will be bolder and freer in expressing hate speech.”

Hate speech in the Medan City Regional Head Election has various consequences. First, there was a polarization of hostility among voters on religious grounds. Second, people harbor hostility and hatred towards certain ethnic groups. Third, it undermines local democracy, which cannot thrive in an environment where even democratically elected members are vulnerable. These consequences can lead to the disintegration of social cohesion, increased prejudice and violence, and threats to the democratic process. Local officials should avoid spreading hatred and oppose inter-religious hostility in Medan City.

### **Interfaith Tolerance, Understanding, Respect and Cooperation**

Interfaith tolerance, understanding, respect, and cooperation are fundamental qualities for building peace and harmony among people of all religions and beliefs. Interfaith dialogue and cooperation can help individuals from different religions to create mutual respect and understanding and recognize common ideals (Eko & Putranto, 2019). Tolerance alone is insufficient as it can demonstrate a sense of superiority and arrogance (Malhotra, 2011). Respect must be the foundation of interfaith partnerships. Interfaith cooperation establishes a high standard of thinking, feeling, and behaving for each individual and community. It transcends the ego and invites us to reach the world beyond ourselves to combat fear, ignorance, and hatred wherever we find it (Omer et al., 2015). Love of God, compassion, and neighbor guides interfaith harmony (Pande, 2020). In addition, tolerance, pluralistic traditions, mutual respect, and diversity of religions and beliefs enhance human brotherhood.

All religions teach tolerance, understanding, respect, and interfaith cooperation. Interfaith dialog refers to the positive and cooperative interaction between people of different religions. Respect for others, respect for the culture of others, and respect for people's freedom to govern themselves can be found in all religions and cultural traditions (Ferrara, 2022). Tolerance, at best, is what pious people do to those they consider pagans, pagans, or idolaters. Therefore, mutual respect in interfaith relations is

essential (Malhotra, 2011).

Instilling the value of religious tolerance and pluralism amid modernization takes work. This is because principles must be built continuously to promote harmony and develop successful programs that will lead to widespread adoption and practice without dampening differences and conflicts in inclusive and pluralistic religious communities. According to the administrator of the Medan City Religious Harmony Forum, Mr. M.S.A.N, the importance of religious harmony education being taught in educational institutions is as follows:

“Improving the quality of faith and devotion to God Almighty can be done by improving the quality of educational institutions, where educators must teach students in all pathways, types, and levels of education in stages, continuously, and continuously in all educational institutions. As a result, educational institutions can use character education to develop noble morals and manners.”

Interfaith cooperation and understanding must be based on respect and recognition of the equal human rights of all people. Religious freedom is almost impossible in a community that has interfaith cooperation. If one religious group does not tolerate another religious group, members of the intolerant group are unlikely to accept the religious freedom of the other group. Therefore, the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) of Medan City organized a National Gathering and International Seminar on Religious Moderation to foster mutual understanding, harmony, and cooperation among people of different religions (Waspada.id, 2022). As for anticipating the politicization of religion that results in the polarization of hatred in Medan City, according to Mr. M.S.A.N, a member of the Medan City Religious Harmony Forum, said that it is essential to understand the Trilogy of Harmony:

“Politics and religion always have their own space in harmony; of course, they have positive and negative impacts. Formulating policies and eliminating the politicization of religion will cool down the community’s social conditions, especially since the political year will soon be welcomed in Medan City. The politicization of religion will lead to the supremacy of a particular religion. The impact will divide other religious communities, especially in Medan City. Therefore, it is important to understand the Trilogy of Harmony for the people of Medan City, among others: internal religious harmony, inter-religious harmony, inter-religious harmony with the government”.

The Trilogy of Harmony in the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) refers to three ideas of inter-religious harmony used by the Indonesian government to maintain inter-religious harmony. Suggested explanations for the Trilogy of Harmony are:

1. Internal religious harmony: harmony within each religion or belief. Tolerance, appreciation of differences, and mutual respect among people of different religions or beliefs are examples.
2. Inter-religious harmony: harmony among people of different religions or beliefs. It includes interfaith discussions, tolerance of differences, and mutual respect among people of different religions or beliefs.
3. Environmental harmony: harmony between adherents of a religion or ideology and the surrounding environment. Tolerance of diversity, awareness of differences, and mutual respect between adherents of different religions or beliefs and the surrounding community are examples.

To maintain the Trilogy of Harmony, the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) is essential in fostering religious harmony in the Medan City community, especially during election seasons. FKUB engages in various activities, including interfaith conversations, socialization of tolerance and respect for diversity, and facilitation of religious activities involving people of other religions or beliefs. FKUB seeks to maintain religious harmony in the Medan City community through these various initiatives.

**Table 1.** Model of Religious Harmony in Anticipating Hate Polarization in the Regional Head Election in Medan City

Activities	Description
Islam	Education on pluralism and religious harmony should be promoted at all levels, from schools to the general public. These educational programs should include an understanding of human rights, tolerance and religious freedom. This will help reduce interfaith tensions and prepare people to deal wisely with differences.
Interfaith Dialogue	Interfaith dialog forums should be initiated and actively promoted. Such activities should bring together religious leaders and community members of different faiths to talk and listen to each other with understanding. Interfaith dialogue enables people to understand the similarities and differences between religions and strengthens tolerance and respect for religious diversity.
Internal Religious Harmony	In the context of religious harmony, it is important to strengthen harmony within each religion or belief. This involves promoting tolerance, appreciating differences, and mutual respect among members of different religions. Religious organizations and institutions should play an active role in facilitating this internal harmony.
Interfaith Harmony	Harmony among followers of different religions or beliefs should also be actively promoted. This can include social, cultural and religious activities that involve participation from different religious communities. These projects can help build bridges between different religious groups and reduce interfaith tensions.
Neighborhood Harmony	Harmony between religious or ideological adherents and the surrounding environment is also important. People should be encouraged to appreciate the diversity within their community and respect each other's beliefs. This can be done through social and religious programs that involve active participation from various community groups.
The Role of Religious Leaders	Religious leaders have a key role to play in promoting religious harmony. They should use their authority and influence to spread messages of peace, tolerance and harmony among their followers. Religious leaders should also serve as mediators in resolving interfaith conflicts and avoid politicizing religion that can fuel polarization and hatred.
Local government commitment	The Medan City government should demonstrate a strong commitment to promoting religious harmony. They should support civil society initiatives and religious institutions that aim to build harmonious relations between religions. The government should also ensure law enforcement against all forms of religious discrimination and intolerance.
Monitoring and Evaluation	It is important to continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of implemented religious harmony programs. This can be done through community surveys, data analysis and consultations with relevant stakeholders. The results of these evaluations should be used to improve and refine future programs.

Source: Data processed by the author, 2023

Based on the author's observations and the results of FGD activities, the Model of Religious Harmony in Anticipating the Polarization of Hatred in Regional Head Election in Medan City can be seen in Table 1. By implementing this model of religious harmony comprehensively and sustainably, Medan City can become a successful example of building a harmonious and religiously diverse society. So,



cooperation between local governments, educational institutions, religious institutions, and religious leaders is expected to carry out these initiatives.

### **Conflict Resolution and Lessons for Building More Relationships**

Interfaith harmony is essential in conflict resolution, and religion often triggers conflict. Peacemaking and conflict resolution are historical and universal, and cultural approaches are essential in creating constructive channels for religious harmony. Historically, this can unlock the power of the Kerukunan tradition in providing the necessary inspiration, guidance, and validation for communities to move toward peace. Tjong A Fie was a legendary Chinese merchant in Tanah Melayu who contributed to creating religious harmony in Medan City (Harahap et al., 2018). As can be proven by the statement of the Executive Board of Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah Organization in Medan City, Mr. A.H.H said:

“Historically, we can see how the Old Bengkok Gang Mosque located next to Maktab Islamiah Tapanuli was also built by a Chinese merchant, Tjong A Fie. The situation built at that time became a historical record and education for Medan City residents that continues to be rolled out from generation to generation about the importance of mutual respect, tolerance, and harmony between different religious communities”.

Tjong A Fie was a Chinese Hakka businessman and kapitan who contributed significantly to the development of society in Medan City. He committed to giving part of his wealth to the people of Medan, regardless of race and religion. Tjong A Fie made many contributions to communities of different religions by helping to build places of worship such as mosques, churches, temples, monasteries, Buddhist temples, and Hindu temples (Harahap et al., 2018). Tjong A Fie's contribution to interfaith harmony in North Sumatra can be seen from his involvement in constructing the Medan Grand Mosque, Hospital in Belawan, Tian Hou Temple, and the Old Mosque in Gang Bengkok. With his presence, we can see how interfaith harmony was in the past in Medan City because they helped each other (Tjongafiemansion.org, 2023).

Religious communities in Medan City should foster interfaith communication and understanding to build harmony, tolerance, and collaboration in a multicultural society. Interfaith interaction becomes even more critical when one religion is a minority, as has been studied in various cities in Indonesia (Simangunsong, 2021). An interfaith pilot project targeting young people in Medan City has been a source of inspiration for young people and a creative way to promote interfaith training (Lutheranworld.org, 2017). Medan City's FKUB has also paid attention to the dialogue between religious leaders (Pratiwi, 2022). Therefore, realizing religious harmony by calling for peace in Medan City is very important. From the view of the Central Executive Board of the Indonesian Christian Scholars Association of North Sumatra Province, Mr. P.D.K.P said:

“Hurt feelings towards political parties or other people in political campaigns are difficult to overcome. Negative words and hate speech were unavoidable during the Medan City election. People unintentionally contributed to the division of the nation. It would be much worse if Christians participated in such hate speech. Therefore, the 2024 Medan City Election can be a catalyst for Christian intellectuals to speak out for the peace and prosperity of the nation. As Christian intellectuals, we may be in the minority. However, the teaching of the gospel should significantly impact this nation, especially in terms of fostering love and peace.”

The above statements illustrate that the polarized climate of hatred between religions is indeed challenging to anticipate. However, this problem is not without solutions because religious leaders still play a role in educating the public so that they do not become contributors to the climate of polarization. In the Regional Head Election, maintaining religious harmony is crucial to prevent conflicts that can damage social stability and harmony. One approach to revolutionizing conflict at this level is to promote interfaith dialogue. Constructive interfaith dialog can help understand the differences and similarities between religions and strengthen tolerance and respect for religious diversity. This can be done through interfaith dialog forums, seminars, or social activities involving various religious communities.

In addition, education about pluralism and religious harmony must be improved. People need to be given a better understanding of human rights, tolerance, and religious freedom. This education is essential to reduce conflicts that may arise during elections. By promoting balanced dialogue and education, communities can be better prepared to deal with differences and ensure that local elections are not a source of interfaith conflict but an example of sustainable harmony.

## 2. Discussion

The results of this study highlight the complexity of political, religious, and social dynamics in Medan City, particularly in the context of local elections. It is shown that religious harmony is often threatened by the polarization of hatred that occurs during election periods, as was the case in the Medan City local elections. The contradictions between Islamic activism, local politics, and democratization illustrate a complicated landscape where religion and ethnic identity can be a trigger for political polarization. The findings presented in this study, supported by previous research, show that religion can be a dominant factor in local politics, even trumping ethnic identity. This phenomenon, as observed in the Medan City local election, shows how the politicization of religion can reinforce the polarization of hatred among voters.

Hate speech spread during the election period has a serious impact on society. It can fuel the polarization of religious-based hostility and deepen the social divide between ethnic groups. In addition, hateful polarization can also undermine local democracy by hampering the process of building social cohesion and threatening political stability. The importance of building religious harmony as a response to the polarization of hatred is becoming increasingly clear. Tolerance, understanding, respect, and interfaith cooperation are identified as key to building peace and harmony in multicultural and multi-religious societies. Interfaith cooperation requires not only tolerance but also respect and a deep understanding of each other's religious beliefs and practices.

An emphasis on education and awareness about pluralism and religious harmony is crucial. These educational programs should include an understanding of human rights, tolerance, and religious freedom to help reduce interfaith tensions and conflicts. In addition, interfaith dialog and internal religious harmony should also be promoted to strengthen tolerance and build trust among different religious communities. The Trilogy of Harmony introduced by Medan City's Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) provides an important foundation for promoting harmony at the local level. Through cooperation between the local government, educational institutions, religious institutions, and religious leaders, the implementation of the model of religious harmony can be an effective instrument to overcome the polarization of hatred and strengthen social harmony in Medan City.

In addition, the role of religious leaders and historical figures such as Tjong A Fie shows how important their contributions are in building interfaith harmony. Inspiration from the past can be a valuable guide in overcoming conflict and building better relationships in the future. In the context

of the 2024 elections, strengthening religious harmony should be a priority for all parties involved, including religious leaders, community leaders, and local governments. Through concerted efforts and strong commitment, Medan City can serve as an example for other regions in building a harmonious, peaceful, and religiously diverse society.

### Conclusion

Based on this research, Medan City faces significant challenges related to religious harmony and polarization of hatred in the context of local elections. The contradiction between religious activism, local politics, and democratization has created a situation where religion often becomes a tool to strengthen certain political interests, which in turn fuels polarization and hostility among voters. Research shows that hate speech and the politicization of religion have undermined social harmony and fueled hostility among voters, as well as affected the integrity of local democracy. However, efforts have been made by various parties, including the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) and religious leaders, to promote tolerance, respect, and cooperation between religions. The model of religious harmony presented demonstrates various approaches that can be taken to overcome the polarization of hatred, including education, interfaith dialogue, strengthening the internal and external harmony of religious communities, and the active role of religious leaders and local governments.

In addition, lessons from history, such as Tjong A Fie contribution to building interfaith harmony in Medan City, show that interfaith cooperation can be key to overcoming conflict and building a harmonious society. In the context of the upcoming local elections, communities, religious leaders, and local governments need to work together to promote harmony, tolerance, and respect for religious diversity. Through a comprehensive and sustainable approach, Medan City can become a successful example of building a harmonious and religiously diverse society. Strengths This research combines perspectives from various disciplines, including political science, sociology, and religious studies, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of religious harmony and polarization of hatred. The research not only identifies existing problems but also presents concrete policy recommendations to improve the situation, such as increasing education on pluralism and religious harmony. The research involved interviews with various stakeholders, including academics, religious leaders, and government officials, which can increase the validity of the findings and the relevance of the recommendations.

A limitation of this study is the availability of data used, which may cover only some of the different perspectives and experiences of various community groups in Medan City. In addition, time, resources, and accessibility constraints may also affect the depth of analysis and interpretation of the results. Although this study has certain limitations, its overall contribution to the understanding of the dynamics of religious harmony and polarization of hatred in Medan City provides valuable insights. By acknowledging these limitations, this study can serve as a basis for further research and development efforts in promoting harmony and tolerance in the community. It can be identified that future research recommendations are important until knowing the ethics of religious group participation in the Regional Head Election in Medan City.

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### **Biographies**

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### **Authorship and Contribution Level**

Indra Fauzan drafted the manuscript and revised the manuscript. Faiz Albar Nasution and Surya Yudha Regif reviewed, collected data and revised the manuscript.

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