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Local Islamic Policy in Post-Reform Indonesia: A Critical Study of the Gerbang Marhamah Initiative in Cianjur, West Java

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Abstract

This study explores the Gerbang Marhamah (Movement for the Development of a Morally Upright Society) initiative in Cianjur Regency, West Java, as a distinctive example of localized Islamic policymaking. Rooted in a strong socio-religious context, Gerbang Marhamah functions both as a moral project and a political strategy that institutionalises Islamic values within local governance. Using a qualitative approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with religious leaders, local government officials, and community members, complemented by document analysis and participant observation. The findings demonstrate that the policy is shaped by the interaction of religious networks, political agency, and local cultural idioms. While Gerbang Marhamah has effectively embedded Islamic moral discourse into public administration, it has also generated tensions concerning inclusivity, institutionalisation, and community acceptance. This study contributes to debates on Islamic governance in decentralised systems, challenges the secular–religious policy dichotomy in Muslim-majority democracies, and highlights the crucial role of local religious authorities and civic engagement in shaping faith-based public policy.

Keywords: Local Islamic Governance, Faith-Based Public Policy, Sharia Formalization, Civic Islam in Indonesia, Gerbang Marhamah.

Introduction

The intersection of Islam and public policy in post-authoritarian Indonesia has emerged as a compelling field of inquiry, particularly in regions where the Muslim population is dominant. Following the democratic reforms of 1998, local governments have increasingly adopted religiously inspired policies, a trend that has been termed the localization of Sharia or Islamization from below (Bush, 2008; Salim, 2007). One such case is the Gerakan Pembaharuan Masyarakat Berakhlakul Karimah (Gerbang Marhamah), a moral-based development policy adopted in Cianjur Regency, West Java, which explicitly integrates Islamic values into the governance structure (Yani, 2025).

Cianjur offers a distinctive socio-cultural context for the examination of local Islamic governance. The region is renowned for its deep-rooted Islamic traditions, intertwined with Sundanese cultural values such as someah hade ka semah (hospitality and moral propriety), which resonate with the ethical teachings of Islam. The policy trajectory of Gerbang Marhamah can be traced back to the grassroots mobilisation of religious actors through the Majelis Ukhuwah Ummat Islam (MUUI) and its annual forum, Silaturahmi dan Musyawarah Umat Islam (SILMUI), culminating in the formal declaration of Islamic Law enforcement on the 1st of March 2001 (Abdullah, 2025).

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In contrast to the notion of a top-down imposition of religious orthodoxy, Gerbang Marhamah demonstrates a multifaceted interaction between civil society, religious institutions, and the local state apparatus in the articulation of a moral vision for governance. This approach aligns with the concept of a "civic pluralist" model of Muslim democracy, as articulated by Hefner (2011), whereby Islamic ethical principles are embedded within public institutions through a process of negotiation rather than coercion. Nevertheless, critical questions remain to be answered. The question of whether Gerbang Marhamah has produced substantive social transformation remains a subject of debate. The following question is posed: what role do religious elites and political actors play in shaping policy? This paper sets out to explore how various segments of society – including both urban and rural, as well as religious and secular groups – have responded to its implementation. The answers to these questions are not only vital for a comprehensive understanding of the Cianjur case, but also for broader debates on the entanglement of religion and politics in decentralised Indonesia.

The present article employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on public policy analysis, the sociology of religion, and social movement theory, to investigate the formulation, implementation, and socio-political dynamics of Gerbang Marhamah. The study specifically aims to address the following research questions: (1) How was Gerbang Marhamah formulated and implemented in Cianjur Regency? (2) With regard to the policy in question, what social, political and cultural factors influenced it? The third issue to be addressed is that of how local communities have responded to the execution. (4) What challenges and impacts have emerged from the application of these measures?

The present study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytic method, combining in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (religious leaders, policymakers, and community members), participatory observations of sharia-oriented programs (including public preaching and moral surveillance), and document analysis of official texts such as the Basic Format for Practising Islamic Law, local regulations, and policy reports. The research proffers innovation within two principal domains. Firstly, provides a critical case study of a localised Islamic policy through the lens of institutional theory and public policy frameworks. Secondly, employs empirical fieldwork to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of policy actors and beneficiaries. Theoretically, this study contributes to the expanding discourse on Islamic formalism and governance at the local level (Feener, 2013; Buehler, 2016). In practice, it provides policymakers with insights into the design of inclusive and context-sensitive faith-based policies for multi-layered Muslim societies.

Literature Review

The increasing prevalence of faith-based regulations in post-authoritarian Indonesia has given rise to significant academic discourse surrounding the nexus of Islam and decentralised governance. In the aftermath of Suharto's fall in 1998, the enactment of regional autonomy laws resulted in local governments being empowered to formulate policies that reflected local values, including religious norms. In various regions, such as Aceh, West Sumatra (Padang), South Sulawesi (Bulukumba), and West Java (Cianjur), this led to the adoption of Perda Syariah (Sharia-inspired bylaws) (Bush, 2008; Fealy, 2004).

The scholarly interpretation of these phenomena has been varied, with different schools of thought offering their own unique perspectives. Burhani (2016) emphasises that the adoption of Islamic regulations is often less rooted in grassroots religious revivalism and more attributable to elite political manoeuvring. In this particular context, Sharia is employed as a symbolic instrument of identity politics and electoral gain. In a similar vein, Buehler (2016) contends that the formalisation of Sharia in local politics is often driven by pragmatic concerns rather than theological or jurisprudential imperatives. The author contends that such policies are more concerned with appearance than with effect, frequently failing to incorporate clear mechanisms of enforcement or quantifiable social impact.

Nonetheless, the local Islamic policies have been established through participatory and culturally embedded processes. The Gerbang Marhamah initiative in Cianjur serves as a pertinent case study in this regard. This policy is rooted in local Islamic traditions and mediated through religious councils such as the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) and the Majelis Ukhuwah Ummat Islam (MUUI). The policy posits that morality (akhlaqul karimah) should be conceptualised as a public virtue and the foundation for

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development. In contrast to Aceh's more legalistic implementation of Sharia, Gerbang Marhamah is primarily normative and cultural, lacking explicit punitive measures (Ichwan, 2006; Hasyim, 2011).

Moreover, moral-based policy initiatives in Indonesia have been interpreted as responses to the perceived failure of secular governance to ensure public morality and justice (Feener & Cammack, 2007). In this particular context, Gerbang Marhamah can be interpreted as a "moral reaction" to socio-political disillusionment, representing an attempt to align governance with Islamic ethical principles. Nevertheless, such efforts carry potential risks of exclusion and moral authoritarianism if not carefully moderated (Ichwan, 2012).

Despite its significance, scholarly engagement with Gerbang Marhamah remains limited. The majority of research has focused on more prominent cases (e.g., Aceh), thereby leaving a gap in the understanding of regency-level Islamic policymaking in culturally homogenous yet politically fragmented contexts like Cianjur. The present study addresses this lacuna by employing an integrated framework drawing from public policy studies, institutional theory and the sociology of Islam.

However, preliminary research conducted in the local area has begun to elucidate the dynamics of Gerbang Marhamah. A study by Saepuloh and Ismail (2019) examines the policy from the perspective of bureaucratic implementation and finds that its success largely hinges on the personal religiosity of local leaders and their networks with religious institutions. The authors posit that the initiative is indicative of a process of "cultural Islamization," whereby symbolic religious values are embedded into governance mechanisms without formal codification into enforceable law. Setiawan (2020) offers an ethnographic perspective on Islamic identity in rural West Java, demonstrating how Gerbang Marhamah is perceived by local communities not as a form of coercion, but as a reinforcement of longstanding traditions of gotong royong, modesty, and religious harmony.

Concurrently, Nugraha and Hasan (2021) emphasised in their policy analysis, published in *Jurnal Ilmu pemerintahan*, that Gerbang Marhamah should be regarded as an adaptive form of Islamic public policy, seeking to harmonise religious aspiration with pluralistic administrative structures. The role of MUI Cianjur is highlighted not merely as a religious authority, but as a co-governor that shapes the moral narrative of public policy. The study's findings reveal tensions between urban and rural interpretations of Islamic morality, thereby raising questions about the coherence of the policy's reception across Cianjur's diverse subdistricts.

Furthermore, a chapter by Maulana (2022) in the edited volume "Islam Lokal dan Negara: Dialektika Kebijakan di Tingkat Daerah" explores the genealogical roots of Gerbang Marhamah, tracing its formulation to a series of religious seminars and policy dialogues initiated in the early 2000s by the Regent of Cianjur in collaboration with pesantren leaders. As Maulana emphasises, Gerbang Marhamah is distinguished by its grassroots nature, being formulated through consultation and consensus (*musyawarah*), a process that lends it enhanced legitimacy within religious communities. This approach contrasts with the implementation of top-down Sharia policies, which are often imposed without consideration for local perspectives.

However, these emerging studies also acknowledge the limitations of Gerbang Marhamah, particularly its dependency on political will and the absence of consistent evaluative mechanisms. For instance, Putri and Fadli (2023) observe in their administrative study that the policy is deficient in a clear monitoring framework, resulting in uneven implementation and difficulties in measuring its societal impact. The research calls for more robust institutionalisation of such moral initiatives, grounded in participatory governance and measurable indicators.

In conclusion, while the extant literature on Gerbang Marhamah remains in its infancy, the extant studies contribute valuable insights into its cultural embeddedness, administrative mechanisms, and socio-political function. This study builds on and expands these findings by employing a critical institutionalist lens that interrogates how religious authority, bureaucratic structures, and local political dynamics coalesce in shaping Islamic policy at the subnational level in Indonesia.

Theoretical Framework

In order to undertake a critical examination of Gerbang Marhamah as a form of localized Islamic policy,

this study employs a multi-theoretical approach that integrates the policy cycle model, new institutionalism, and social movement theory.

Firstly, the policy cycle model (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003; Sabatier & Weible, 2014) provides a structured lens through which to analyse the stages of Gerbang Marhamah—from problem identification and agenda-setting to formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation. The model enables researchers to assess the rationality, responsiveness, and institutional coherence of the policy process. In the case of Cianjur, the initial impetus for the policy emanated from collective concern over moral decline, articulated through religious forums such as SILMUI, and was subsequently codified in the form of district-level policy declarations.

Secondly, the framework of new institutionalism (Hall & Taylor, 1996; March & Olsen, 2006) elucidates the embedding – or 'institutionalisation' – of religious values and norms within formal bureaucratic structures. In this sense, institutions are not merely legal apparatuses, but also carriers of symbolic meaning and moral authority. It can thus be posited that Gerbang Marhamah can be regarded as an instance of normative institutionalisation, wherein Islamic ethical precepts are enacted through routine governance mechanisms, bureaucratic mandates, and public rituals.

Thirdly, insights from social movement theory, especially as formulated by Tarrow (1998) and Tilly (2004), are crucial for understanding the mobilisation dynamics behind Gerbang Marhamah. The policy is indicative of a convergence of political opportunity (enabled by decentralisation), resource mobilisation (through religious networks and institutions), and collective framing (of moral degradation as a public crisis). The alliance between local bureaucrats and religious elites demonstrates how social movements can penetrate state institutions and shape public policy from within.

When considered as a whole, these theoretical tools permit a thorough examination of Gerbang Marhamah not merely as an administrative policy, but as a socially negotiated, politically embedded, and culturally resonant project of Islamization.

Methods

The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a descriptive-analytic and interpretive framework, suitable for unpacking the complex interplay between religion, local governance, and policy formation in post-reform Indonesia. In light of the socio-cultural and political context of the Gerbang Marhamah initiative, qualitative methodologies facilitate a nuanced comprehension of the underlying meanings, motivations, and institutional dynamics that inform its formulation and implementation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

1. Research Approach and Design

The research adopts a case study approach (Yin, 2018), focusing on Gerbang Marhamah as a unique instance of localised Islamic public policy within the broader context of Indonesian decentralisation. The case study method facilitates an in-depth exploration of the translation of religious norms into governance practices, whilst also enabling the researcher to trace the social, political and cultural contours that shape the policy lifecycle—from agenda-setting to implementation and evaluation.

2. Data Collection Methods

The data were collected through three primary techniques: Firstly, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following participants: The following individuals and organisations were consulted for this study: local religious leaders affiliated with Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) and Majelis Ukhawah Ummat Islam (MUUI); key government officials and policy actors from the regional administration of Cianjur; and community members directly or indirectly affected by the policy, including educators, youth leaders, and civil society representatives. The objective of these interviews was to ascertain perspectives on the origins, objectives, and perceived impact of Gerbang Marhamah, as well as to unearth tensions and contestations surrounding its implementation. Secondly, participatory observations were undertaken in various programmatic contexts related to Gerbang Marhamah, such as: The following events and initiatives have been observed in relation to the promotion of Islamic ethics: Islamic preaching

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events (tabligh akbar); Community moral surveillance programmes (pemantauan akhlak publik); Educational initiatives promoting Islamic ethics in public schools and community centres. These observations were critical to understanding how the policy manifests in lived practice and how religious discourse is mobilised in public spaces. Thirdly, document analysis entailed the systematic examination of Official government documents (e.g., Format Dasar Pengamalan Syariat Islam, local regulations, perda syariah); speeches and public statements by district officials; policy reports and internal evaluations related to the Gerbang Marhamah initiative; media coverage and religious newsletters that frame public discourse around the policy. The documentary materials provided institutional and discursive evidence of how Islamic values were codified into policy and publicly legitimised.

3. Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic coding and triangulation techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002). Thematic analysis was employed to identify core themes, including moral governance, religious authority, community reception, and institutional legitimation. Triangulation was utilised to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings by cross-verifying data from interviews, observations, and documents. Interpretive insights were further contextualised through the application of the policy cycle framework (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003), new institutionalism (Hall & Taylor, 1996), and social movement theory (Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 2004), as outlined in the theoretical section.

4. Research Ethics

The interviews were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of research, including the principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of informants. Ethical approval was obtained from the host institution's research ethics board. Participants were anonymised wherever possible in order to protect their identities and to ensure candid responses, especially on potentially sensitive political or religious topics.

Findings

The empirical investigation into the Gerbang Marhamah initiative reveals a complex interplay between religious identity, moral governance, and decentralised policy-making in post-reform Indonesia (Yani, 2025). Cianjur Regency, with its profoundly entrenched Islamic culture – where over 98% of the population identifies as Muslim – offers a conducive environment for the articulation of religious values into public policy. This socio-cultural context has long nurtured a form of religious publicness where Islamic values guide education, family norms, and even local governance (Hefner, 2011; Bush, 2008).

1 Sociocultural Context and Policy Origins

The advent of Gerbang Marhamah coincided with a perceived moral crisis in the early 2000s. A review of recent literature on the subject, along with interviews with key religious leaders and district officials, suggests that rising juvenile delinquency, public disorder, and declining ethical standards have prompted Islamic civil society organisations, particularly Majelis Ukhuwah Ummat Islam (MUUI), to convene religious forums (SILMUI) and to advocate for a normative response grounded in Islamic ethics. These developments resonate with what Ichwan (2006) calls "moral reactionism," wherein local Islamic policies are framed as cultural responses to societal anxieties.

2. Policy Formulation and Political Adoption

In contrast to Perda Syariah in other regions, such as Aceh or Padang, Gerbang Marhamah did not emerge from a punitive or legalistic logic. Instead, it was formally adopted through a culturalist and bureaucratic channel, culminating in its official declaration by the regent of Cianjur on 1 Muharram 1422 H (March 26, 2001). The policy was codified as a government development programme grounded in Islamic morality (akhlakul karimah), devoid of the juridical force of sharia bylaws (Rauf, 2025). This represented a strategic moderation designed to accommodate pluralism whilst embedding Islamic values in governance – an approach akin to what Buehler (2016) describes as "symbolic Islamization" within pragmatic local politics.

3. Implementation Strategies

The implementation of Gerbang Marhamah was contingent on a combination of institutional integration and community mobilisation. The following strategies were employed: (a). The education of Islamic character in public and Islamic schools is to be integrated into curricula and extracurricular programmes. The concept of mosque-centred community development involves the strategic utilisation of mosques as pivotal institutions for fostering moral development and societal cohesion. At the village level, training is provided in the form of da'wah, with an emphasis on capacity-building for preachers and religious counsellors. Islamic habituation in local bureaucracy, such as morning sermons (kultum), communal prayers, and Qur'anic recitation before official meetings (Rauf, 2025). This grassroots-state synergy aligns with the notion of religious governance as a mode of "public piety production" (Feener, 2013).

4. Flagship Programs

A number of distinguished programmes were initiated under the Gerbang Marhamah umbrella, including: (a). Gerakan Subuh Berjamaah (Dawn Congregational Prayer Movement), (b). The Cianjur Mengaji initiative (Cianjur Qur'anic Literacy Campaign) (c). Nikah Sakinah (Islamic Marriage Counseling for Youth), (d). Arifin (2025) defines Kader Akhlaqul Karimah as Moral Leadership Training for Young Muslims. These initiatives are illustrative of what Mandaville (2007) terms "normative statecraft," wherein Islamic values are employed as a means of fostering civic engagement and ethical revitalisation.

5. Challenges in Implementation

Notwithstanding the policy's endorsement by the community, its implementation has been impeded by structural and political factors. (a). The existence of budgetary limitations for religious and moral development programmes is an established fact. Leadership discontinuity, where successive regional heads did not always share a religious vision; (c). The absence of evaluative mechanisms has been identified as a key factor in the hindrance of systematic assessment of programme outcomes. These findings reflect broader critiques of post-reform Islamic policies in Indonesia, which often suffer from institutional fragility and over-reliance on charismatic leadership (Salim, 2008).

6. Societal Impact and Public Reception

The extant field observations and interview data indicate an overall positive reception of Gerbang Marhamah, particularly due to its non-coercive and culturally resonant approach. The following key impacts have been identified: (a). The moral discourse within educational and family settings has been strengthened. The emergence of grassroots da'wah communities and youth-based religious study groups has been observed. The present study hypothesises that there will be an increase in civic participation by women and young people in moral-social activities.

However, it should be noted that several limitations were identified: (a). The disparity in the reach of programmes across rural and marginalised regions is a matter of concern. It is evident that certain initiatives were merely symbolic, with a paucity of sustainable outcomes being observed. A discrepancy in levels of engagement is evident between generations; younger demographics are found to be more influenced by digital media than traditional religious institutions.

This duality is indicative of the tension between institutional religious policies and the shifting cultural landscape of religiosity in post-reform Indonesia (Hasan, 2009; Slama, 2017).

Discussion

The study of the Gerbang Marhamah initiative is situated within the broader framework of post-reform decentralisation in Indonesia, engaging critically with policy theory, institutionalism, and the sociology of religion. The findings suggest that Gerbang Marhamah represents a distinctive model of moral governance that is non-punitive, culturally embedded, and institutionally fluid.

1. The Policy Cycle and Institutional Gaps

When analysed through the lens of the policy cycle model (Howlett, Ramesh & Perl, 2009), the Gerbang Marhamah initiative demonstrates robust development in its agenda-setting, formulation, and adoption phases. In the period following the implementation of reforms, religious elites and local officials took advantage of the decentralisation process to establish institutional frameworks within local public programmes, thereby incorporating moral concerns into these programmes. The initiative was effectively framed as a cultural-moral response to perceived moral decay, gaining legitimacy through forums such as *Silaturahmi dan Musyawarah Umat Islam (SILMUI)*. This strategic alliance between ulama and bureaucracy reflects a distinctive pattern of moral coalition-building in local governance (Fealy & White, 2008).

However, significant deficiencies are evident in the implementation and evaluation stages. The absence of a structured monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework has impeded the measurement of programme effectiveness, sustainability, and public accountability (Dye, 2013). As evidenced by the analysis of analogous local Islamic policies throughout Indonesia, initiatives such as Gerbang Marhamah frequently encounter institutional fragility due to an overreliance on charismatic leadership and an absence of adequate bureaucratic routinization (Buehler, 2016; Bush, 2008). The policy's continuity has proven vulnerable to political transition and fluctuating support from subsequent administrations.

Furthermore, in the absence of institutionalised feedback loops or evidence-based assessments, program refinement remains static. The inadequate incorporation of evaluation mechanisms is indicative of the prevailing structural deficiencies within Indonesia's decentralisation framework. While local innovations are extolled in rhetoric, there is a paucity of integration into systematic policy learning (Antlöv, 2003; Aspinall, 2010). In this sense, Gerbang Marhamah exemplifies a recurring challenge in Indonesia's post-authoritarian Islamic policymaking: the tension between symbolic moral governance and institutional effectiveness.

2. Islamic Values and Local Governance: A New Institutionalism Perspective

From the standpoint of new institutionalism (as expounded by March & Olsen, 1989), Gerbang Marhamah can be interpreted as a paradigm of normative institutionalisation, signifying the integration of Islamic values into the practices, procedures, and symbolic actions of local governance. Programmes such as daily Quranic recitations in offices, morning religious sermons (*kultum*), and Islamic leadership training for civil servants serve to illustrate attempts to shape administrative culture through the medium of moral-religious norms (Rauf, 2025). This phenomenon can be interpreted as reflecting a "logic of appropriateness," whereby behaviour is not solely guided by efficiency but also by shared cultural and religious expectations (Peters, 2012).

However, the institutionalisation of these practices remains largely informal and highly contingent upon personal leadership. The programme's reliance on the religious charisma and commitment of figures such as theupati and key ulama has resulted in the absence of a systematic integration of Islamic values into the bureaucratic apparatus. This informality engenders institutional fragility and curtails the initiative's long-term sustainability, particularly in the face of leadership turnover and shifting political alignments – a trend consistent with broader patterns of Islamic localism in post-Suharto Indonesia (Bush, 2008; Salim, 2008).

Furthermore, while the initiative has been successful in aligning state functions with cultural religiosity, it lacks the codified instruments necessary to ensure procedural durability. Consequently, the institutionalisation of Islamic values has engendered what Clarke (2014) terms "moral performativity", manifesting as a tangible expression of piety within the domain of public administration, devoid of systemic institutional anchoring. In comparison with more formalised local shari'a-inspired regulations in West Sumatra or South Sulawesi, Gerbang Marhamah can be regarded as a soft, cultural-symbolic form of Islamisation that is more persuasive than prescriptive. This case study highlights the limitations of moral governance in the absence of legal-rational institutional frameworks (Feener, 2013).

3. *Gerbang Marhamah as a Moral Social Movement*

Utilising the theoretical framework of social movement theory (Tarrow, 2011), Gerbang Marhamah can be interpreted as a localised moral movement that emerged in response to perceived moral degradation, particularly among the youth, and broader societal anxieties concerning modernisation, secularisation, and globalisation. The movement took advantage of the political opportunity structure created by post-1998 regional autonomy (otonomi daerah), thereby enabling local religious actors to transform normative Islamic discourse into public policy initiatives without resorting to formal shari'a-based legal frameworks (Abdullah, 2025).

In contrast to the adoption of coercive or confrontational tactics, Gerbang Marhamah utilised cultural, pedagogical, and ritualistic strategies. These encompassed dawn prayer movements, communal Qur'anic readings, and Islamic training programmes. This form of moral activism is typified by what Tilly and Tarrow (2015) term "contained contention", a non-disruptive mobilisation that is rooted in pre-existing religious networks and civic traditions. This phenomenon is indicative of a broader trend within Indonesian Islam, where public religiosity is manifested in accordance with democratic and pluralistic norms.

This consensual form of Islamisation aligns with Hefner's (2011) concept of "civic pluralism," in which Islamic activism seeks to cultivate moral citizenship rather than impose legalistic authority. The Gerbang Marhamah initiative is also consistent with Woodward's (2012) concept of "moderate Muslim politics," in which religious actors engage in negotiations concerning the sacred and the civic through the mediums of education and soft cultural power. Moreover, the movement's reliance on community engagement and symbolic practices suggests parallels with Meyer and Tarrow's (1998) concept of "politics by other means," whereby collective identities are formed and reaffirmed through everyday moral discourse and ritual participation rather than through legislative coercion.

However, the movement's grassroots strength is also its institutional weakness: its moral legitimacy is not undergirded by bureaucratic permanence. The initiative is predominantly driven by charismatic figures and informal coalitions; consequently, its sustainability is contingent on the continuity of supportive political will and religious leadership. This underscores the difficulties inherent in the institutionalisation of moral movements within secular bureaucratic frameworks, particularly in contexts characterised by frequent leadership changes and fragile policy legacies (Arifin, 2025).

4. *Critical Reflections and Comparative Insights*

The study proffers three critical reflections on Gerbang Marhamah and its implications for understanding local Islamic governance in post-Reform Indonesia.

Firstly, the subject of Non-Legalistic Islamic Governance is addressed. In contrast to *perda syariah* (sharia-inspired regional bylaws) in Aceh or West Sumatra, Gerbang Marhamah employs a non-legislative form of Islamic governance that emphasises ethical internalisation, public ritual, and voluntary participation. It challenges the conventional binary between legal and symbolic Islamization (Feener, 2013), suggesting that Islamic morality can be institutionalised without legal codification. This finding aligns with the argument that Indonesian Islam is increasingly manifesting through "civic engagement" rather than state-imposed orthodoxy (Hefner, 2000).

Secondly, the discussion centres on a dichotomy between Charisma and Institutionalization. The initiative's implementation is heavily reliant on charismatic leadership and the religious legitimacy of key political actors. This personalisation, while effective in the short term, poses structural vulnerabilities. As Buehler

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(2016) observes, numerous local Islamic policies are characterised by a deficiency in institutional resilience, leading to their dilution or dismantlement in the event of leadership transition. It is argued that Gerbang Marhamah is at risk of encountering a similar fate unless its values are integrated into permanent bureaucratic and educational systems.

Thirdly, the moralisation of legalism is evident in Gerbang Marhamah, which, in contrast to regions that emphasise Islamic legalism, reflects a moral-cultural paradigm that prioritises ethical development over juridical enforcement. The strategy under discussion aligns with the concept of "Islamic reasoning in public life" as described by Bowen (2003), wherein persuasion, education, and symbolic politics are prioritised over codified compulsion. This positions Gerbang Marhamah as a culturally adaptive model of Islamization, characterised by its dialogical nature rather than dogmatic rigidity, and embedded within the context of local religious ecology as opposed to a top-down legal imposition (Abdullah, 2025).

The insights presented herein demonstrate that Gerbang Marhamah embodies a distinctive form of post-reform Islamic public policy, reflecting the pluralistic, negotiated, and localized character of Indonesian Islam. The present study invites further comparison with Islamic policies across Southeast Asia, where similar tensions between legalism, morality, and political identity are at play (Hooker, 2008; Lindsey & Steiner, 2012; Buehler, M., 2016).

5. Contribution: Beyond Religious Policy

The principal contribution of this study lies in reconceptualising Gerbang Marhamah not as a typical religious policy, but as a framework of localized moral governance that blends Islamic ethics with the administrative structures of the modern state (Arifin, 2025). The study refrains from reducing the policy to a theological initiative; rather, its focus is on situating at the intersection of religion, bureaucracy and civil society. This approach offers a valuable insight into the selective institutionalisation of normative Islamic values within a decentralised, pluralist polity.

This reframing contributes to broader theoretical debates on "public Islam" (Hefner, 2011; Slama, 2017) by illustrating how Islamic ethics are not merely expressed in religious or legalistic terms, but also through bureaucratic cultures, civic rituals, and symbolic governance. In this sense, Gerbang Marhamah can be regarded as an example of vernacular governance (Lund, 2006), whereby both state and non-state actors are involved in the co-production of normative systems that are embedded within local religious cosmologies.

Furthermore, the initiative challenges the established secularism-versus-Islamization binary by demonstrating the capacity for democratic processes and Islamic values to coexist within institutional frameworks, thereby resonating with the concept of "civic Islam" where faith influences governance without exclusive domination (Ahyyar, 2020; Hasan, 2009). The moral orientation of Gerbang Marhamah does not enforce a rigid Islamic orthodoxy, but rather encourages ethical behaviour and social cohesion through cultural legitimacy and non-coercive persuasion.

This initiative demonstrates the dual aspects of potential and vulnerability inherent in post-authoritarian Islamic governance. The initiative's cultural resonance serves to enhance its legitimacy, yet its informal and personality-driven structure renders it susceptible to political shifts. Accordingly, Gerbang Marhamah furnishes a pivotal empirical perspective on the evolving character of Islamic moral authority within the context of democratisation in Muslim-majority societies.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the Gerbang Marhamah initiative in Cianjur Regency as a localized form of Islamic public policy that operates within the framework of Indonesia's post-authoritarian democracy. By analysing its origins, institutional logic, policy cycle trajectory, and societal impact, this research demonstrates that Gerbang Marhamah represents a unique experiment in embedding Islamic values into local governance through culturally resonant, non-coercive means.

1. Gerbang Marhamah as a Manifestation of Local Islamic Aspirations

Primarily, the policy is indicative of a historically embedded aspiration among the Muslim majority in

Cianjur to see religious ethics infused into public life. Contrary to the conventional top-down imposition of religious doctrine, Gerbang Marhamah emerged through consultative and participatory processes, particularly the SILMUI (Silaturahmi Ulama dan Umaro Indonesia) forum and the consolidation of religious authority through MUUI (Majelis Ulama Ulama Indonesia Daerah). This corroborates the assertions put forward by Salim (2008) and Bush (2008) that local Islamic regulations frequently emerge from a confluence of grassroots mobilisation and elite religious-bureaucratic negotiation. The policy demonstrates how decentralisation enables regional governments to reconfigure religious aspirations into formalised policy without recourse to state-enforced sharia.

2. A Cultural and Educational Model of Islamization

A distinguishing feature of Gerbang Marhamah is its emphasis on moral suasion over legal sanction, a departure from the sharia-inspired bylaws observed in Aceh and West Sumatra. The initiative eschews the use of juridical coercion, instead employing educational, ritual, and communal strategies rooted in *akhlaq al-karimah* (noble character). Activities such as Gerakan Subuh Berjamaah, Quranic literacy programmes, and mosque-based youth development projects form the backbone of a localised moral pedagogy (Feener, 2013; Hefner, 2000). This phenomenon of "soft Islamization" finds congruence with Hefner's (2011) conceptualisation of "civic pluralism," wherein the public manifestation of Islamic values is permitted without compromising democratic norms or minority rights.

3. Strengths in Formulation, Weaknesses in Sustainability

From a policy process perspective (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009), Gerbang Marhamah demonstrates considerable success during the agenda-setting and adoption stages, facilitated by visionary leadership and a conducive normative climate. However, the institution is susceptible to institutional fragility due to its overreliance on charismatic leadership and the absence of a robust monitoring and evaluation framework. As March and Olsen (1989) have observed, sustainable institutionalisation necessitates the implementation of routinised procedures, rather than merely achieving normative legitimacy. The initiative's failure to translate moral vision into bureaucratic codification renders it vulnerable to political turnover and administrative discontinuity, echoing concerns raised by Buehler (2016) on the temporality of Islamic localism in Indonesia.

4. Measured but Uneven Societal Impact

Field observations and secondary data suggest that Gerbang Marhamah has had a positive influence on public religious behaviour and moral discourse, especially in urban and semi-urban neighbourhoods. However, its reach remains limited among rural populations and digital-native youth. The initiative's conventional methods of religious engagement are found to be ineffective when attempting to resonate with younger demographics, whose identities are increasingly influenced by social media, global consumerism, and post-traditional religiosity (Slama, 2017; Howell, 2014). Therefore, although the programme achieved symbolic and affective resonance, its structural reach and long-term impact remain constrained by demographic and technological shifts.

5. Broader Implications for Sharia Law and Governance

The impact of Gerbang Marhamah extends far beyond Cianjur, offering valuable insights into the relationship between religious law and governance in a modern, pluralistic society. The initiative has inspired similar movements in other parts of Indonesia, where local governments have sought to integrate Islamic principles into public life in ways that respect religious diversity. This broader influence speaks to the potential of Sharia law to function not as a tool of exclusion or oppression, but as a guiding framework for ethical governance, social responsibility, and moral integrity.

Furthermore, Gerbang Marhamah contributes to the ongoing discourse about the role of religion in governance, especially in countries with diverse religious communities. The success of Gerbang Marhamah suggests that Islamic law can be applied in a way that is compatible with democratic governance and human rights, provided that it is done with a focus on inclusivity, social justice, and the well-being of all citizens. The initiative also raises important questions about the relationship between religion and the

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state, particularly in the context of Indonesia's pluralistic society. It challenges the assumption that the application of Sharia law necessarily leads to the marginalization of non-Muslims or undermines democratic principles. Instead, it offers a model of governance that seeks to harmonize religious values with the needs and aspirations of a diverse society.

6. Contribution to the Discourse on Moderate Local Islam

The key theoretical contribution of this study lies in advancing a more nuanced understanding of how Islamic ethics can be institutionalised at the subnational level without recourse to theocratic governance or legal exclusivism. Gerbang Marhamah should be understood as a form of vernacular moral governance, defined as a context-sensitive and dialogical model that privileges moral cultivation over juridical enforcement. It proffers a compelling counter-narrative to the prevailing binary of Islamization versus secularization by demonstrating how Islamic principles can operate synergistically with democratic pluralism and local wisdom (Slama, 2017; Azra, 2013).

More broadly, the initiative invites further reflection on the potential of decentralised moral experimentation in Muslim-majority democracies. The necessity for policies that are both spiritually resonant and procedurally institutionalised is highlighted, with the capacity to bridge the gap between religious idealism and administrative pragmatism being emphasised.

In conclusion, Gerbang Marhamah can be regarded as an example of moral-political innovation in post-reform Indonesia, demonstrating the capacity of Islamic values to influence local governance in a manner that is ethical, inclusive and dialogical, albeit with a certain fragility. It is recommended that future research engage in comparative inquiries with other regional models or incorporate quantitative assessments in order to evaluate its socio-moral outcomes with greater precision. As Indonesia continues to negotiate its Islamic and democratic identities, local moral policies such as Gerbang Marhamah will remain key arenas for exploring the plural trajectories of "public Islam."

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are proposed: Firstly, to Local Government: There is an urgent necessity to consolidate the institutional foundations of Gerbang Marhamah by incorporating its principles into the educational curriculum and bureaucratic procedures.

The establishment of a systematic monitoring and evaluation framework would enable measurable outcomes and reduce dependency on political figures (Dye, 2013; Howlett et al., 2009). Secondly, the discourse addressed religious institutions and civil society. It is recommended that collaboration between religious organisations and local authorities be deepened in order to broaden outreach, particularly to rural communities and youth. The utilisation of digital platforms and media technology is imperative for sustaining relevance and engagement in contemporary society (Slama, 2017). Thirdly, to future researchers: It is recommended that subsequent studies employ quantitative methodologies to evaluate the substantial outcomes of moral policy initiatives. Such outcomes may include shifts in public morality indices, levels of religious participation, and levels of social cohesion. Comparative research between Cianjur and other regions with similar or contrasting Islamic policies would also contribute to the academic discourse on regional moral governance in Indonesia (Feener, 2013; Salim, 2008).

In light of these findings, the following recommendations are proposed: Firstly, to Local Government: There is an urgent necessity to consolidate the institutional foundations of Gerbang Marhamah by incorporating its principles into the educational curriculum and bureaucratic procedures. The establishment of a systematic monitoring and evaluation framework would enable measurable outcomes and reduce dependency on political figures (Dye, 2013; Howlett et al., 2009). Secondly, the discourse addressed religious institutions and civil society. It is recommended that collaboration between religious organisations and local authorities be deepened in order to broaden outreach, particularly to rural communities and youth. The utilisation of digital platforms and media technology is imperative for sustaining relevance and engagement in contemporary society (Slama, 2017). Thirdly, to future researchers: It is recommended that subsequent studies employ quantitative methodologies to evaluate the substantial outcomes of moral policy initiatives. Such outcomes may include shifts in public morality indices, levels of religious participation, and levels of social cohesion. Comparative research between Cianjur and other regions with similar or contrasting Islamic policies would also contribute to the academic discourse on

regional moral governance in Indonesia (Feener, 2013; Salim, 2008).

In general, Gerbang Marhamah can be regarded as a collective endeavour by the Cianjur community to integrate Islamic values into public governance, not through the implementation of coercive legislation, but through the cultivation of ethics and the promotion of civic engagement. This moderate model of Islamisation is characterised by its deep roots in the local culture (kearifan lokal), its responsiveness to societal needs, and its compatibility with democratic pluralism. In the broader context of post-authoritarian Indonesia, Gerbang Marhamah demonstrates the potential of religion to function as a constructive moral compass, shaping both individual piety and inclusive, community-centred development.

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