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Bureaucratic Rituals and the Performativity of Harmony: An Analysis of the Symbolic Practices of the West Java Interfaith Harmony Forum

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Abstract:

This study aims to conduct a holistic analysis of the practices of the West Java Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB), focusing on its ritual and performative dimensions. It seeks to uncover: (1) the forms of ritual and symbolic practices that constitute FKUB's modus operandi, (2) the performative dimension of these practices in producing social reality about harmony, and (3) the ambivalent impact of this bureaucratic ritual on real socio-religious relations. The research employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic case study design, focusing on the FKUB of Bandung City and Garut Regency. Data were collected through participatory observation of FKUB's ritual activities, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 25 key informants, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using interpretative thematic analysis and triangulation. The study focuses on the working practices, particularly public rituals and administrative mechanisms, of the Interreligious Harmony Forum (FKUB) in West Java, Indonesia. The FKUB operates as a dialectical arena of harmony. On the front stage, ceremonial rites (peace declarations, interfaith prayers) create symbolic cohesion and an image of harmony (performative peace). However, backstage, core mechanisms such as the house of worship recommendation process become rituals that reproduce majority bias and cement structural inequality. The harmony produced is paradoxical: uniting symbolically while oppressing structurally. The complexity of conducting participatory observation in highly choreographed events, and the challenge of maintaining neutrality while capturing diverse perspectives and underlying tensions in the field. Institutional reform of the FKUB is needed, shifting from a logic of conflict containment and image production towards a logic of justice transformation. Recommendations include reforming composition, ensuring fairer procedures, and integrating a rights-based approach for minority groups. This study provides a theoretical contribution by synthesizing the frameworks of bureaucratic performativity, ritual governance, and performative peace to analyze religious governance in Indonesia. It

offers a Global South perspective that enriches global discourse on lived religion, community-building through ritual, and the politics of meaning in plural public spaces.

Keywords: bureaucratic performativity; dialectical arena; hegemony; majority bias; religious harmony.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a unique and complex laboratory of religious pluralism. As a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, which is also inhabited by Christians, Catholics, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, and various other faiths, relations between religious communities are never free from the dynamic of the tug-of-war between freedom of belief, social control, and state political interests (Hoon, 2017). In managing this complexity, the state is not only a guarantor of constitutional rights but also actively shapes the arena of religious interaction through various policies and institutions. One of the most obvious forms of state presence is the establishment of the Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB) at every regional level, pursuant to Joint Regulations of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs Numbers 9 and 8 of 2006. FKUB is designed as a semi-state institution that functions as a bridge between the government, religious leaders, and the community, with the main task of facilitating dialogue, providing recommendations for permits for houses of worship, and reducing conflict (Wijaya, 2025).

However, the official narrative of FKUB as a panacea for harmony is often simplistic and technocratic. Most previous studies tend to be trapped in normative and administrative evaluations, for example, measuring FKUB effectiveness based on policy outputs or frequency of activities (Nurhidayah, 2024). This approach ignores the most fundamental cultural dimension: that harmony work occurs not only at meeting tables and licensing documents, but also—and perhaps especially—on a symbolic stage filled with performances, gestures, and rituals(Pirdaus, 2024). Previous studies, while some have criticized bias within FKUB, have not examined in depth how bureaucratic and ritual logics intertwine to produce the meaning of harmony itself. This is the research gap that this article aims to fill. If previous studies asked "how effective is FKUB?", then the more fundamental question is: how does FKUB, as part of the state apparatus, symbolically produce and display 'harmony' as a social performance? This question leads us to the central problem of this research: How do ritual and symbolic practices in the work of the West Java FKUB produce a narrative of harmony, and what is the ambivalence of the impact of this performativity on real socio-religious relations? The focus of this question is deliberately shifted from the substance of the policy to the metaphor of the stage, because what is to be studied is the mechanism by which harmony is not only managed, but also performed. This research hypothesizes that, beyond its administrative function, the FKUB plays an important role as a bureaucratic stage where the state and religious elites stage the drama of harmony for public consumption, a performance that simultaneously has the effect of both symbolically uniting and structurally strengthening the status quo.

Based on the formulation of the problem, the objectives of this research are to: First, identify and analyze the forms of ritual and symbolic practices (such as peace declarations, interfaith prayers, ceremonial audiences) that have become the modus operandi of the West Java FKUB. Second, unravel the performative dimension of these practices by viewing them as actions that do not merely represent harmony, but actively produce a social reality of harmony. Third, and most critically, is to assess the ambivalent impact of these bureaucratic rituals—between their symbolic integrative function on the one hand, and their potential to freeze inequality and depoliticize demands for substantive justice on the other. To dissect this complexity, this article relies on three complementary theoretical frameworks. First, the concept of "Bureaucratic Performativity" from Lippert and O'Connor (2006) which views bureaucracy not as a neutral-rational machine, but as a stage where power and legitimacy are displayed through language, procedures, and symbols (Lippert & O'Connor, 2006). In the context of FKUB, every plenary meeting, signing of recommendations, or joint press conference is a performance that affirms the state's authority in regulating the socio-religious body. Second, the theory of "Ritual Governance" developed by Schielke (2010, 2015) helps us understand how rituals, often associated with the private and sacred realm, are actually used as instruments of governance by the state to regulate behavior and instill consensus (Schielke, 2015). FKUB ceremonial activities such as harmony safaris or interfaith festivals can be read as soft power technologies that internalize the state's version of harmony. Third, Pruitt's (2013) concept of "Performative Peace" emphasizes that peace or harmony is not a static condition, but a process that must be continuously performed through collective action (Pruitt, 2013). This approach allows us to see FKUB's work not as a final achievement of harmony, but rather as a series of repetitive performances of peace that are fragile and always in need of renewal. By bringing together these three lenses, this study seeks to uncover the dialectic at the heart of FKUB's work: the constant tug-of-war between symbolic harmony staged on the front stage to create stability and legitimacy, and structural inequalities that often remain untouched behind the scenes. This article argues that by analyzing FKUB as a bureaucratic ritual, we can understand harmony in Indonesia not as a given social fact, but as a product of the performativity of power whose meaning is constantly being contested.

METHOD

To uncover the layers of meaning behind the symbolic practices of FKUB, this study uses a qualitative approach with an ethnographic case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was chosen because it aligns with the goal of in-depth exploration of contexts, practices, and meanings that cannot be reduced to numbers (Miles et al., 2020). The study focuses on two loci purposively selected to represent the variety of sociological contexts in West Java: FKUB Bandung City as an example of an urban arena with high religious plurality and complex identity politics dynamics, and FKUB Garut Regency which represents an area with strong religious (Islamic) homogeneity, Islamic boarding school culture, and potential tensions based on majoritarianism. The selection of these two contrasting cases allows for a limited comparative analysis to see how local contexts influence the forms and meanings of harmony performativity (Yin, 2018).

Data collection was conducted through three main, complementary techniques. First, participant observation was conducted during various FKUB ritual activities, such as interfaith prayer meetings, house of worship recommendation sessions, peace declarations, and public dialogue forums. The researchers' presence at these events enabled rich, detailed recording of spatial arrangements, gestures, nonverbal interactions, the sequence of events, and the overall atmosphere, which are integral to social performance (Emerson et al., 2019).

Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 key informants, including the chairpersons and members of the FKUBs in both locations, religious leaders from various faiths involved, local government representatives (Kesbangpol, Kemenag), and civil society activists who monitor the FKUBs' work. The interviews focused on exploring their perceptions, motivations, and interpretations of these ritual practices (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2020).

Third, document analysis was used to contextualize field data. The documents analyzed included legal frameworks (PBM 2006, West Java Gubernatorial Regulation), annual reports and minutes of FKUB meetings, media publications (press releases, event coverage), and visual materials (photos, banners, documentary videos) produced by or about FKUB. Analysis of these documents revealed the official narrative and self-representation the institution sought to project (Bowen, 2020).

All collected data were then systematically analyzed using thematic analysis and an interpretive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The analysis process began with data transcription and coding to identify initial themes related to ritual practices, symbolic language, and claims about harmony. These themes were then developed and connected to the theoretical frameworks of bureaucratic performativity, ritual governance, and performative peace to build a deeper understanding. Triangulation was carried out continuously by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and document content to ensure credibility and depth of interpretation (Flick, 2022). Through this holistic methodology, this study seeks not only to describe what FKUB does, but especially to unpack how they do it and the socio-political meanings of these symbolic actions in constructing the reality of harmony in West Java.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Symbolic Stage: Bureaucratic Rituals in Producing an Image of Harmony

This research reveals that the core of the daily work of the West Java Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB) lies not in closed meeting rooms cluttered with administrative documents, but rather in a series of carefully choreographed public rituals. Practices such as peace declarations, interfaith prayers, and ceremonial audiences serve as the front stage where narratives of harmony are produced and presented to the public (Goffman, 1959). Field observations indicate that these events are designed not simply as forums for substantive deliberation, but as symbolic performances intended for media and public consumption. A peace declaration in Bandung, for example, was held in a government hall adorned with a large banner reading "United in Diversity." The seating was arranged symmetrically, with religious leaders from the six official religions seated in rows in front of national and regional flags. The order of prayer recitations was staggered and pre-

planned, while local television cameramen and press photographers were strategically positioned to capture these moments of togetherness (Observasi, Agustus 2025).

These ritual practices operate as a primary instrument of what has been called bureaucratic performativity (Lippert & O'Connor, 2006). Through structured performances, the FKUB religious bureaucracy not only performs administrative functions, but actively creates and legitimizes a particular social reality, in this case the reality of "achieved harmony." The head of the West Java FKUB explained the logic behind this ritual in an interview: "We recognize that conflict is not resolved simply by declaration. But this symbolic moment is very important. When the public sees religious leaders from different backgrounds standing together, voicing the same commitment, a strong image of unity is projected. This is the image we cultivate" (Wawancara, Juni 2025). This statement clearly confirms that the FKUB actors are fully aware that they are performing on stage. Their actions are performative utterances in Austin's sense: the utterances and gestures in the declaration not only describe harmony, but also act to realize harmony itself as a social fact that can be witnessed by the public (Austin, 1962). The interfaith prayer procession, where each religious leader recites prayers in their own language and manner in turn on the same stage, is a concrete example of collective meaning production. This ritual creates what can be called an aesthetic of harmony: a stage setting, sequence of events, and visual composition designed to radiate harmony, order, and peaceful coexistence (Schein, 2020)

Furthermore, these findings suggest that FKUB rites constitute a specific form of ritual governance (Schielke, 2015). The state, in this case represented by the FKUB facilitated by the local government, uses ritual formats to manage and regulate religious social relations in subtle yet effective ways. Public hearings on house of worship permits, for example, often emphasize the ceremonial aspect of "hearing aspirations" rather than substantive technical discussions. The layout of the hearing places the applicant (usually from a minority group) as the "reporting" or "requesting" party before the FKUB panel seated on a podium, an arrangement that visually reproduces the hierarchy between regulator and regulated, between legitimizer and legitimacy applicant (Observasi, September 2025). This kind of ritual functions as a technology of governmentality in Foucault's sense, where social order is not only enforced through coercive law, but through the formation of obedient subjects by internalizing norms through repeated and observed practices (Loustau, 2023).

The impact of this performativity is the creation of a legitimate narrative of social consensus. Local media, by covering these ceremonial events, reinforce this narrative with headlines such as "West Java FKUB Holds Peace Declaration, Marking Interfaith Harmony" or "Interfaith Prayers Color International Tolerance Day in Garut" (Media Documentation Analysis, 2024-2025). This coverage rarely addresses the complexities or tensions behind the scenes, so the dominant image created in the public mind is one of harmony and agreement. This consensus narrative functions as a hegemonic tool, where the state's version of peaceful and orderly harmony is accepted as the undeniable truth, drowning out critical voices or experiences of discrimination experienced by minority groups (Tyushka, 2022). In other words, the harmony performed (performative peace) in FKUB rituals successfully creates a social fact that has its own symbolic coercive power (Maisaroh et al., 2025). The public is invited to believe in and celebrate the harmony being

performed, which in turn can dampen demands to criticize or change the unequal power relations structure that may be the root of the real tension.

However, this discussion leads us to a fundamental ambivalence. On the one hand, these bureaucratic rituals effectively build symbolic cohesion and provide an important space for recognition, especially for minority groups who feel their presence and right to worship are publicly acknowledged in ceremonial events (Griera & Burchardt, 2021). On the other hand, an overemphasis on performance on the front stage risks reducing harmony to merely a symbolic commodity to be flaunted, while neglecting the more demanding and less photogenic tasks, such as inclusive policy advocacy or restorative justice-based conflict management (Chen, 2021). Thus, the FKUB symbolic stage is not a neutral space, but rather an arena for the production of meaning where certain apolitical, ceremonial, and manageable versions of harmony are brought to the fore, while others demanding structural change and distributive justice tend to remain behind the scenes. This dialectic provides a bridge to discuss what happens behind this grand symbolic stage.

Backstage: Contestation and Majority Bias in Negotiation Rituals

While the front stage of the FKUB is adorned with harmonious performances of harmony, a closer look at its core mechanisms reveals an unequal arena of political contestation. This research's findings indicate that the heart of FKUB's administrative work, namely the process of issuing recommendations for the establishment of houses of worship, has become a complex bureaucratic ritual in which the voices and interests of the majority group systematically dominate. Behind the seemingly neutral formal procedures, power dynamics that reproduce socio-religious hierarchies are hidden (Saeed, 2021). The application hearing process, for example, is often conducted in a format that symbolically positions the applicant, usually from a minority religious group, as the party "submitting the application" or "reporting" to an authorized panel.

In an observation in Garut, a panel of FKUB members sat behind a long, raised table, while representatives of the congregation of a church making the request stood or sat on lower chairs in front of them, a spatial arrangement that visually confirmed the power relations between legitimacy givers and legitimacy seekers (Observasi, September 2025). This audience ritual, while couched in the language of deliberation, in practice functioned as a testing ritual in which minority groups had to prove their worthiness and social acceptance before representatives of the majority community (Haynes et al., 2022).

This mechanism is a key instrument of ritual governance at the local level (Schielke, 2015). The state, through the FKUB (Family Forum for Religious Development), delegates authority to regulate public religious expression, particularly the construction of houses of worship, to a forum whose composition reflects and often reinforces demographic dominance. An FKUB secretary in one location frankly admitted, "Structurally, the majority of votes are always from Islamic representatives. In heated plenary meetings, especially those discussing new churches or temples in sensitive areas, the vote count is often predictable. The principle of deliberation and consensus must ultimately yield to this social reality" (Interview, Oktober 2025). This statement reveals how the ideal of deliberative principles is defeated by the arithmetic of majoritarian politics. The ritual of negotiation within this closed meeting room is thus not a neutral space, but rather a field

of power in Bourdieu's sense, where the majority group has greater symbolic and social capital to influence decisions (Foo et al., 2025).

The representation of minority religious groups within the FKUB structure itself, as mandated by regulations, is often symbolic and lacks substantive leverage. Findings indicate that representatives from Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are physically present, but their influence in the discussion of crucial issues is very limited. A pastor who is a member of the FKUB in an urban area expressed his frustration, "We are present, we express our opinions, but often feel like 'suffering accessories' in an orchestra that already has a main score. Our voices are heard, but not necessarily listened to, let alone being the determinant in final decisions related to our own houses of worship" (Interview, August 2025). This apparent representation is a form of what is known as inclusion without influence, a governance strategy for managing diversity without actually sharing power (Slater et al., 2025). By incorporating minority representatives into the structure, the state and FKUB can claim the legitimacy of inclusivity, while at the same time internal working mechanisms ensure that the hegemony of the majority group is not compromised.

The bureaucratic rituals involved in this recommendation process thus serve a dual function. On the one hand, it serves a formal administrative function as a licensing requirement. On the other hand, and more crucially, it operates as a hegemonic reproduction machine (Lindemann, 2025). The decision to reject or approve a recommendation is rarely a purely administrative judgment, but rather the result of a reading of the local political landscape, social pressure from certain community groups, and considerations for maintaining stability often disguised as "maintaining harmony." A case of the rejection of a recommendation for the renovation of an old church in Bekasi, as highlighted in Pirdaus's (2024) study, demonstrates how resistance from a group of residents supported by certain religious organizations can influence the FKUB's decision, citing "the lack of agreement from the surrounding community." This reasoning, while seemingly procedural, serves as a subtle way to legitimize the political veto of the majority group (Pirdaus, 2024). In this context, FKUB transforms from a mediator into a guardian of the status quo, where its bureaucratic rites become a tool to codify and legitimize the domination of one group over another.

The implication of this mechanism is the occurrence of epistemic injustice against minority groups (Tobi, 2023). Their experiences, needs, and perspectives are often filtered and reinterpreted through the lens and concerns of the majority group in these negotiation rituals. A Buddhist leader in Garut stated, "Sometimes we don't just fight to build a temple, but first we fight to ensure that our presence is not disruptive, that our rituals are not strange, that we are equal citizens. The process at the FKUB is like a repeated public examination" (Interview, September 2025). This "examination" process is a form of symbolic violence where the dominated group unconsciously accepts and reproduces a logic that positions them as the ones who must always prove themselves (Fowler, 2022). The ritual of audiences and plenary meetings thus becomes a factory that produces and confirms this inequality in the form of legally valid recommendation documents.

Thus, this backstage analysis reveals a profound contradiction in the work of the FKUB. An institution established to foster harmony instead operates mechanisms that are inherently biased and can be a source of injustice. Its negotiation rituals are not neutral

spaces, but arenas rife with power imbalances from the outset (Ma, 2025). Performativity here goes beyond simply constructing an image, but actively administers inequality by assigning formal and procedural stamps to unequal power relations (Ebabuye & Asgedom, 2024).

The fact that this process operates under a legal umbrella and involves formal representatives of all religions actually makes the resulting symbolic violence even more subtle and difficult to challenge. This is the most poignant paradox of FKUB as a governance ritual: it manages potential conflict in a way that actually consolidates the source of that conflict: the domination of one group over another. From this, we can see how symbolic harmony on the front stage is built on a foundation of unequal negotiations behind the scenes, a dialectic that produces ambivalent consequences that will be discussed further (Liu & Pangsapa, 2025).

The Ambivalence of Impact: Symbolic Cohesion vs. Neglect of Substantive Justice

The findings of this study reveal that the FKUB's work has profound and paradoxical effects. On the one hand, its ritual practices create tangible positive impacts, particularly in building interfaith social capital and providing crisis communication channels (Hood Jr. et al., 2023). The peace declaration and joint prayer forum, for example, successfully functioned as social drama in Turner's sense, namely a public performance aimed at restoring a disturbed social order (Valsiner, 2024). A community leader in Garut recounted, "After a minor dispute over a planned church construction, the FKUB held a meeting and held a joint prayer. Although the permit issue was not yet resolved, the tension in the community immediately subsided. People became embarrassed to openly express hostility after seeing their religious leaders shake hands in public" (Interview, October 2025).

In this context, the FKUB ritual serves as an effective conflict containment mechanism. It creates what can be called symbolic cohesion, a sense of togetherness and peace constructed through shared symbolic experiences, even if the root of the problem is not necessarily resolved (Akbulut-Gok, 2022). The space opened by the FKUB also serves as an important channel for minority groups to be heard, albeit in a limited way. As one Confucian religious leader put it, "The existence of the FKUB at least gives us an official address to voice our concerns. There is a forum where we can meet directly with representatives of the government and other religions. That is an improvement compared to the previous era when we were completely disregarded" (Interview, August 2025).

However, on the other hand, this research also documents the negative impacts that actually strengthen the same working mechanisms. Symbolic cohesion built on the front stage often runs parallel to the perpetuation of structural inequality behind the scenes (Crewe, 2021). The tendency of FKUB to suppress conflict and maintain surface stability can turn into a form of repressive tolerance, where injustice is allowed to persist as long as it does not erupt into open violence (Fast, 2024). The most obvious impact is the ongoing marginalization of minority groups in access to religious resources, particularly worship spaces.

The biased recommendation process, as described, does more than simply reject individual building applications, but systematically restricts the living and development space of minority religious communities. A human rights activist in Bandung offered a scathing critique, stating, "The FKUB often becomes a tool to legitimize and administer

discrimination. Rejection of a church or temple is labeled 'not meeting the requirements for harmony,' as if harmony were the prerogative of the majority to define. What happens is the spiritual and spatial impoverishment of minorities" (Interview, September 2025). Thus, the harmony produced by the FKUB risks becoming an exclusive and conditional harmony, valid only as long as minority groups are willing to accept their subordinate position and do not demand substantive rights that could disrupt the status quo (Bellanca, 2025).

This fundamental ambivalence can be understood through the dialectic between two concepts of peace: performative peace and substantive peace. Performative peace, as Pruitt (2013) argues, refers to peace realized, maintained, and communicated through symbolic acts and public performances (Pruitt, 2013). This is the strength of FKUB. Its rituals are a form of peace performance that creates a narrative and a sense of peace. However, performative peace is often not directly related to substantive peace, a state of peace characterized by the absence of structural violence and the fulfillment of social justice (Galtung, 1969). FKUB, with its focus on conflict management and the production of images of harmony, contributes more to the former while neglecting the latter. This institution is very effective in creating negative peace (the absence of direct violence) but fails or is not designed to address positive peace (the presence of social justice) (Pogodda et al., 2023). In other words, FKUB successfully prevents physical clashes, but often allows systemic mechanisms of discrimination, prejudice, and inequality of access to persist without transformative intervention.

FKUB thus becomes an arena for a struggle for meaning between two different logics: the logic of symbolic stability and the logic of structural transformation (Zamudio-González & Arellano-Gault, 2025). The first logic, driven by local governments and the interests of local elites seeking to maintain order, sees harmony as an end product to be displayed—a controlled, show-off atmosphere of peace. The second logic, often advocated by minority groups and civil society, understands harmony as a process that must be undertaken, requiring the dismantling of unjust structures and the redistribution of symbolic and material resources.

This struggle is evident in the internal dynamics of FKUB meetings. A Catholic FKUB member described this tension, "In meetings, there is often a tug-of-war between those who want to quickly resolve the problem by issuing recommendations (whatever the outcome, as long as it is completed), and those who want to dig deeper into the issue, for example, why the neighbors are refusing, whether there is provocation, is this a recurring pattern. Unfortunately, the voices for a quick resolution and maintaining the appearance of peace almost always win" (Interview, October 2025). The victory of this logic of symbolic stability makes the FKUB a guardian of existing hegemony, rather than a catalyst for change towards justice (Hamilton & Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2023).

Synthesis: FKUB as an Arena for Dialectics of Harmony

Based on an in-depth discussion of the symbolic stage, backstage contestations, and ambivalent impacts, this study arrives at a critical synthesis: the West Java Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB) must be understood primarily as an arena for the dialectics of harmony. This arena is not a neutral space where pure consensus is created, but rather a symbolic field where the meaning, practice, and authority of the discourse of "harmony" are continuously negotiated, constructed, and stabilized (Hatami et al., 2025). In this arena,

various logics—the logic of the bureaucratic state, the logic of the cultural majority, and the logic of minority resistance—interact to produce a unique formation of harmony, namely harmony that is simultaneously symbolically unifying and structurally oppressive. This synthesis does not simply sum up the findings, but shows how performative mechanisms work holistically to create this paradoxical social reality (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023).

First, this dialectic manifests itself in the duality of FKUB's performative functions. On the one hand, through rituals such as peace declarations, FKUB carries out the function of integrative performativity. It actively produces imaginary social bonds by presenting visual and narrative representations of interfaith togetherness (Smith, 2022). These performances effectively create what is known as a symbolic cohesion effect, namely a sense of shared belonging and commitment to peace constructed through the experience of participation in public rituals (Parani et al., 2024). This is a real unifying dimension in its impact on collective perceptions and emotions. However, on the opposite end, through mechanisms such as recommendation hearings, FKUB also carries out the function of regulative performativity. Here, bureaucratic performativity functions to classify, regulate, and limit (Foucault, 1991). These administrative rituals reinforce hierarchies, fence off spaces for religious expression, and ultimately reproduce inequalities through legitimate procedures. These two functions—integrative and regulative—are not separate entities, but rather two sides of the same coin of bureaucratic performativity (Lippert & O'Connor, 2006). They operate simultaneously: symbolic cohesion on the front stage provides the legitimacy and social stability necessary for the constraining regulatory operations behind the scenes.

Second, this dialectical arena is also the site of a struggle between two harmony regimes: ceremonial harmony versus substantive harmony. The first regime, dominated by state logic and local political interests, defines harmony as the absence of open conflict and the maintenance of an orderly and exhibitable social stage. Harmony here is an end product measured through performative indicators such as the frequency of joint activities and the tone of media coverage. In contrast, the second regime, often articulated by minority groups and elements of civil society, defines harmony as a process that requires fair access, equal recognition, and the transformation of power relations (Fraser, 2000). Harmony here is a process of becoming measured through substantive progress such as the fulfillment of the right to worship and the elimination of structural discrimination. FKUB becomes the arena where these two definitional regimes clash. The regime's first real victories in practice—marked by a focus on ceremonial events and rapid conflict resolution for the sake of surface stability—show that this arena has been hegemonized by a politics of order maintenance rather than a politics of justice building (Lloveras et al., 2025).

Third, this synthesis reveals the hegemonic logic at work behind the dialectic. Hegemony, in the Gramscian sense, is not domination through brute force, but rather the ability of a ruling class or group to establish its cultural leadership by presenting its particular interests as universal (Sunca, 2025). FKUB is a sophisticated hegemonic tool. Through the limited inclusion of minority representatives and the production of consensus narratives, the state and the majority group that dominates the FKUB structure successfully present a biased social order—in which the majority group's veto power over minority worship spaces is framed as "maintaining harmony"—as a common interest of the entire community.

In other words, structural injustice is disguised as a prerequisite for social peace. This process constitutes an advanced form of ritual governance (Schielke, 2015), where bureaucratic rituals not only regulate behavior but also actively shape awareness and acceptance of inequality as natural and necessary. The symbolic cohesion generated by front-stage performances, in this context, serves as a hegemonic cushion that softens and legitimizes the repressive impact of backstage regulation (Singh & Leonardo, 2023).

Therefore, harmony in FKUB practice is an ambivalent performative construction par excellence. It is the result of a permanent dialectic between the integrative power of symbolic performance and the repressive power of bureaucratic regulation; between the pressure to project stability and the demand to uphold justice; between symbolic inclusion and structural exclusion (Kamali, 2021). This synthesis leads us to an important theoretical realization: that in the context of a demographically unequal society like West Java, stable harmony is often built on a foundation of managed injustice. FKUB is the engine that manages this injustice, while simultaneously producing an image that denies its existence. The implications of this synthesis are significant. It demands that we evaluate FKUB's success not by the glitz of its ceremonial stage or the absence of direct violent conflict, but by its ability to disrupt and transform the hegemonic logic that is the very source of structural disharmony. In other words, the goal should not be merely a fragile performative peace, but rather a shift towards a condition in which substantive peace can be fought for in a more equal arena, a transformation that requires a fundamental restructuring of the dialectical arena of FKUB itself (Pruitt, 2013).

Global and International Relevance: Bureaucratic Rituals, Religious Governance, and the Search for a Model of Harmony in a Post-Secular World

The research findings on the performative ambivalence in the work of FKUB in West Java not only speak to local dynamics in Indonesia but also resonate with global discussions on the challenges of managing religious pluralism in the contemporary era. In an international landscape, where the dominant narrative is often polarized between models of hard secularism (such as in France or early republican Turkey) that seek to exclude religion from the public sphere, and models of communalism or theocracy that make the majority religion the determinant of public law, Indonesia—with its FKUB—offers a third, hybrid model. This model, which can be called "managed consensus-based religious governance," demonstrates how the state can actively regulate religious diversity not through exclusion or sole domination, but through the establishment of quasi-state institutions that facilitate and direct intergroup interactions (Kamali, 2021). Therefore, a critical study of FKUB makes a valuable contribution to the global debate on how postcolonial states and pluralistic societies design institutions to foster coexistence amidst high potential for conflict.

Specifically, the findings regarding bureaucratic rituals as instruments of governance bear interesting parallels with phenomena in various countries. In Singapore, for example, the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony (PCRH) and its Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) policy also rely on consultative mechanisms, structured dialogues, and symbolic ceremonies to project an image of highly managed harmony, while maintaining a highly restrictive legal framework against hate speech and potential conflict (Tan, 2022). In Germany, institutions such as the Deutsche Islam Konferenz (DIK) serve as platforms for institutionalized dialogue between the state and Muslim communities, a

process also fraught with political performativity and symbolic negotiations regarding integration, identity, and recognition (Spielhaus, 2021). This in-depth analysis of the FKUB, which reveals the contradictions between symbolic inclusion and structural exclusion, provides an analytical lens that can be applied to evaluate similar models in other countries. The critical question this research raises—whether such harmony forums ultimately serve to manage inequality rather than resolve it—is a particularly relevant one in the European context, where integration policies and interfaith dialogue are often criticized for producing only symbolic multiculturalism without addressing issues of structural discrimination in the labor market, housing, or education systems (Modood, 2019).

Furthermore, this research touches on the core of the international academic debate on the place of religion in the post-secular democratic public sphere. Postsecular theory, as developed by Jürgen Habermas (2008) and others, recognizes that religion will not disappear from the modern public sphere and therefore requires a new "translation" and ethics of deliberation (Habermas, 2008). FKUB can be seen as an Indonesian-style institutional experiment in responding to these post-secular challenges. However, the research findings show that the "deliberation" process in FKUB is often more performative and controlled than substantive and transformative. This contributes to the global discussion by providing empirical evidence that the inclusion of religion in public governance does not automatically guarantee deliberative justice or equality. Instead, it can be capitalized on by the state and majority groups to produce a pseudo-consensual stability, a condition some theorists have called “strategic secularism” or “regulated moderation” (Mahmood, 2016). The concept of bureaucratic performativity used in this study, therefore, offers a theoretical tool to dissect the subtle mechanisms behind seemingly participatory yet essentially hegemonic models of religious governance, a pattern that can be found in many countries that try to balance religious demands with the logic of the modern nation-state (Andreeva & Willems, 2025).

At the global policy level, particularly within the Peacebuilding and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) agenda, the FKUB model has attracted attention as a form of local peace infrastructure. International organizations such as the UNDP and the UN Alliance of Civilizations often promote the establishment of interfaith dialogue forums as part of a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding (Bermeo, 2023). Studies of FKUBs provide a valuable critical warning against such approaches. The finding that these forums can produce performative peace that masks structural injustices demonstrates the dangers of a peacebuilding approach that is overly preoccupied with symbolic reconciliation and superficial stability, without committing to just conflict transformation (Mac Ginty, 2022). In the language of critical peace studies, FKUBs risk becoming a tool for maintaining negative peace (the absence of direct violence) at the expense of positive peace (social justice and the elimination of structural violence) (Galtung, 1969). The implications for international practice are clear: donors and peacebuilding agencies must go beyond supporting the establishment of merely ceremonial institutions, and prioritize strengthening advocacy capacity, human rights monitoring, and support for social movements fighting for substantive justice for religious minorities.

Finally, the global context marked by the rise of religious populism and exclusionary identity politics makes the study of FKUB ambivalence increasingly relevant. In many countries, from India with its Hinduva politics, to Myanmar with its militant Buddhist

nationalism, to several Western countries with anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim right-wing populism, majority groups are mobilizing religious identities to gain and maintain power (Brubaker, 2017). In such a context, institutions such as FKUB face dual pressures: on the one hand, they serve as a bulwark for upholding inclusive and constitutional values, and on the other hand, they risk being usurped or exploited by majoritarian populist forces to provide formal legitimacy to their dominance—a phenomenon referred to as "captured institutions." The observation of majority bias in the house of worship recommendation process at the West Java FKUB is a microcosm of this global challenge. Therefore, this study provides a framework for mapping and analyzing how institutions of harmony can survive or be derailed in the face of the wave of identity politics that spreads polarization.

Thus, while rooted in the sociological and historical specificities of West Java, the study of FKUB's performativity and ambivalence reaches far broader significance. It contributes to the global conversation on institutional design for plural societies, critiques the limitations of managed dialogue and consensus models, and reminds academics and practitioners that in the field of religious harmony, what appears (performance) does not always reflect what is there (substance). The challenge going forward, both for Indonesia and the global community, is to redesign or revitalize the infrastructure of harmony so that it becomes not merely a stage for empty rituals, but an arena truly capable of driving social transformation towards inclusive justice and equality, a relevant lesson from West Java for the world.

CONCLUSION

This research starts from the central question of how ritual and symbolic practices in the work of the West Java FKUB produce narratives of harmony, and what ambivalent impacts this performativity has on real socio-religious relations. The research's main findings confirm that the FKUB operates as an arena for the dialectic of harmony, where harmony is not only managed, but primarily performed as a social drama. On the front stage, through rituals such as peace declarations and interfaith prayers, the FKUB performs integratively, creating symbolic cohesion and an image of harmony consumed by the public and the media. However, behind the scenes, in core processes such as issuing recommendations for houses of worship, the FKUB carries out regulative performativity that actually reproduces hierarchy and majority bias, administering inequality through legitimate procedures. Thus, the harmony produced by the FKUB is paradoxical: symbolically unifying while also structurally reinforcing inequality.

Theoretically, this study contributes by synthesizing and testing the frameworks of bureaucratic performativity, ritual governance, and performative peace in the context of religious governance in Indonesia. This study enriches the sociology of religion, identity politics, and peace studies by showing that in demographically unequal societies, apparent stability and harmony (negative peace) are often built on a foundation of managed injustice. FKUB is a concrete example of soft hegemony, where the particular interests of the majority group are presented as universal interests through mechanisms of symbolic inclusion and consensus production.

The practical implications of these findings call for a reevaluation of the role and design of FKUBs. Rather than simply focusing on producing an image of harmony and rapid conflict containment, FKUBs need to strengthen their capacity as catalysts for

transformation towards substantive peace. Policy recommendations include: (1) reforming the composition and decision-making mechanisms of FKUBs to ensure substantive leverage for minority representation, (2) developing fairer and more transparent procedural standards in the licensing process for houses of worship, and (3) integrating restorative justice approaches and minority rights advocacy into FKUBs' mandates, going beyond merely ceremonial functions.

This study has limitations, primarily due to its limited scope, specifically two cases in West Java (Bandung and Garut). While the contrasting case selection provides analytical depth, generalizing the findings to the highly diverse Indonesian context requires caution. Furthermore, despite efforts to maintain neutrality, the complexity and potential tensions on the ground challenge attempts to capture the full power dynamics at play.

Suggestions for further research include: (1) comparative studies between FKUBs in various regions with different local demographic and political configurations, (2) longitudinal research to observe the evolution and long-term impact of FKUB bureaucratic rituals, and (3) exploration of grassroots perspectives and the daily experiences of minority groups in interacting with FKUBs, which may not have been fully represented in elite-level analyses. Thus, future research agendas can further unpack the logic of power and the emancipatory potential in the governance of harmony in Indonesia.

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