

The Construction of Moderate Muslim Networks in Western Geopolitics: Implications of the RAND Corporation Report on the *Islam Nusantara* Discourse

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Abstract:

This article examines the geopolitical strategy devised by the RAND Corporation through two major reports, *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (2003) and *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (2007), which aimed to establish a moderate Muslim network as an instrument of US foreign policy. Using a content analysis approach and a critical review of primary documents, this study examines RAND's operational definition of "moderate Muslim," its objectives for establishing the network, its implementation strategies, and its impact on Islamic discourse in Malaysia and Indonesia. The findings indicate that RAND's conception of "moderation" is instrumental and not rooted in Islamic scholarly traditions, but rather is defined based on alignment with Western values of liberal democracy, religious pluralism, and gender equality. This article argues that RAND's strategy has influenced the landscape of Islamic organizations in the archipelago through funding of non-governmental organizations, interventions in Islamic education curricula, and media empowerment.

Keywords: *RAND Corporation, Moderate Muslims, Islam Nusantara, Geopolitics, Wasatiyyah.*

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Introduction

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States faced enormous pressure to reform its approach to the Muslim world. The policy response was not only military but also ideological. One of the intellectual actors that played a central role in shaping this strategy was the RAND Corporation, a research and policy analysis institution with historically close ties to the United States security apparatus (Rabasa et al., 2007). Through two major reports, *Civil Democratic Islam* (2003) written by Cheryl Benard and *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (2007) led by Angel Rabasa, the RAND Corporation formulated a systematic strategy to build networks of moderate Muslims throughout the Muslim world as a counter to the influence of groups classified as "fundamentalist" and "radical" (Benard, 2003).

The term "moderate Muslim" in the RAND Corporation discourse does not refer to the notion of *wasatiyyah* rooted in Islamic scholarly tradition, but rather to a geopolitical construct that defines moderation based on alignment with Western liberal values: procedural democracy, religious pluralism, gender equality, and the separation of religion from public life. This definition is instrumental and aimed at supporting United States foreign policy interests (Ismail, 2009). For Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia and Indonesia, the RAND Corporation's strategy has undeniable relevance. These two countries, with the world's largest Muslim populations and historically known for their moderate religious traditions, serve as models and laboratories for implementing this strategy. The *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* report explicitly names several figures and organizations from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore as part of the network it seeks to build (Rabasa et al., 2007).

This study aims to answer several key questions: (1) Who is the RAND Corporation and what is the history of its formation? (2) What is meant by "moderate Muslims" and what are their characteristics according to RAND? (3)

What is the RAND Corporation's goal in forming a moderate Muslim network? (4) What strategies are designed to achieve these goals? (5) How are these strategies implemented in Malaysia and Indonesia? (6) Is there evidence that US-backed institutions fund certain groups and promote these agendas?

This article employs a content analysis approach to primary RAND Corporation documents and the works of Muslim scholars who critique that approach. The analytical framework employed draws on the concept of *wasatiyyah* in Islamic tradition to provide a comparative perspective grounded in Islamic normative sources.

Research Method

This research is qualitative using document analysis and critical review methods. The primary data sources consist of two RAND Corporation reports that are the focus of the study, namely *Civil Democratic Islam : Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (Benard, 2003) and *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Rabasa et al., 2007), as well as the book *Cabaran Akidah: Pemikiran Islam Liberal* (Ismail, 2009) published by the Federal Territory Mufti's Office of Malaysia as a secondary source that explains the strategic impact of the report on Islamic discourse in Malaysia. As supporting sources, this study refers to the works of Muslim scholars who have analyzed the phenomenon of liberal Islam and the construction of moderation in the contemporary geopolitical context, including Adian Husaini, Khalif Muammar (2006), and Greg Barton (1999). Reference to Yusuf al-Qaradawi's (2022) work on *wasatiyyah* is used as a comparative normative framework from an Islamic scholarly perspective.

The data were analyzed through three stages: first, identification and extraction of key propositions in the RAND document; second, mapping the conceptual categories used by RAND to define moderate Muslims; and third, critical assessment of the implications of these categorizations with reference to Islamic scholarly traditions and empirical realities in the archipelago.

Result and Discussion

Profile and History of the RAND Corporation

RAND Corporation stands for "Research and Development." It was founded in 1946 as a research project under the auspices of the Douglas Aircraft Company in Santa Monica, California, specifically designed to serve the strategic analysis needs of the United States Air Force. This project was a response to the post-World War II strategic imperative, in which the United States recognized the need for an institution capable of translating scientific research into national defense and security policy (Benard, 2003). In 1948, with funding from the Ford Foundation, Project RAND transformed into an independent, nonprofit research institution called the RAND Corporation. Despite its nonprofit status, RAND's relationship with the United States government and security apparatus remains very close. Since its founding, RAND has become one of the world's most influential think tanks, producing policy analysis in the fields of defense, international security, economics, education, and, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, began researching Islamic studies and the Middle East (Benard, 2003).

Throughout the Cold War, the RAND Corporation played a crucial role in formulating the United States' counter-communism strategy. The intellectual experience of that era later served as a reference in designing a post-2001 counter-Islamic radicalism strategy. Angel Rabasa, lead author of *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, explicitly equates the project of building moderate Muslim networks with America's strategy for confronting communism during the Cold War (Rabasa et al., 2007). The following are relevant historical milestones of the RAND Corporation:

Table 1. *Historical Timeline of the RAND Corporation*

Year	Key Developments
1946	Established as Project RAND under the Douglas Aircraft Company, Santa Monica, California.
1948	Transformation into an independent RAND Corporation with support from the Ford Foundation.
1945-1991	Played an active role in the formulation of Cold War strategy, including analysis of nuclear forces and counter-communist strategy.
2001	After the September 11 attacks, RAND began developing intensive studies on the Islamic world and radicalism.
2003	<i>The Civil Democratic Islam</i> report was published , which recommended strategies for dividing and managing Muslim groups.
2007	<i>The Building Moderate Muslim Networks</i> report was published , which details the operational strategies for building moderate Muslim networks globally.

Ismail (2009) notes that the RAND Corporation, officially a nonprofit, in practice functions as an extension of the policy interests of the United States government, including the Departments of Defense and State. This relationship is evident in its funding patterns and the orientation of policy recommendations, which consistently align with American strategic interests.

Definition and Characteristics of Moderate Muslims: RAND's Perspective

One of the most crucial issues in both RAND Corporation reports is how the agency defines "moderate Muslims." This definition is not merely an academic categorization; it has broad policy implications, determining who deserves the support of the US government and who should be opposed. In *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (2007), Angel Rabasa and his research team define moderate Muslims as those committed to four core values: first, democracy; second, acceptance of nonsectarian sources of law; third, respect for the rights of women and religious minorities; and fourth, opposition to terrorism and illegitimate violence. This suggests that RAND's definition of moderation is essentially the identification of Muslims who are willing to accept secularism as a framework for public life. In other words, "moderate" in RAND's vocabulary means Muslims who are willing to separate Islam from the socio-political realm and accept the supremacy of Western liberal values. In more detail, the RAND Corporation maps the characteristics of moderate Muslims as follows:

The first characteristic established by the RAND Corporation was a commitment to democracy as understood in the Western liberal tradition. Rabasa et al. (2007) stated that a moderate Muslim must support democracy and believe that political legitimacy originates from the will of the people expressed through free elections. This report also details that support for democracy means rejection of the concept of an Islamic state, especially those that require the exercise of political power by unelected clerical groups, as is the case in Iran. In RAND's view, no one can speak for God, what determines God's will in a situation is the community consensus as reflected in freely expressed lay opinions (Rabasa et al., 2007). It should be noted that the definition of democracy used by RAND is democracy in the Western liberal sense, not simply a negotiation mechanism (*shūrā*) rooted in Islamic tradition. Although RAND acknowledges that some moderate Muslims are trying to reconcile democracy with Islamic texts, what is ultimately emphasized is the result, namely the unconditional support for pluralism and internationally recognized human rights, not its normative sources. This means that Muslims who accept democracy on the basis of *shūrā* but reject secularism still risk being seen as not fully fulfilling this characteristic.

The second characteristic is acceptance of nonsectarian sources of law. Rabasa et al. (2007) stated that the dividing line between moderate Muslims and radical Muslims in countries whose legal systems are based on the Western system is the question of whether sharia should be implemented or not. RAND takes a clear stance that conservative interpretations of sharia are incompatible with democracy and internationally recognized human rights, arguing that under sharia, men and women and believers and non-believers do not have the same rights (Rabasa et al., 2007). This characteristic directly requires that RAND's moderate Muslims must be willing to accept the secular legal system as a public framework and reject the application of sharia as state law. This is not just a matter of methodology, it is a rejection of the principle of sharia sovereignty which is one of the most important principles in Islamic legal epistemology. In other words, a Muslim who believes that sharia is a valid source of law, as is believed by the majority of Muslims, automatically does not meet this second characteristic according to RAND's standards.

The third characteristic is respect for the rights of women and religious minorities. Rabasa et al. (2007) stated that moderate Muslims are open to Islamic feminism and open to religious pluralism and dialogue between religions. In the context of women's rights, this report specifically mentions that moderate Muslims must be willing to reinterpret texts of the Al-Qur'an and Sunnah that are considered discriminatory against women, including the provision that daughters' share of inheritance is half that of sons, on the grounds that the situation today is different from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (Rabasa et al., 2007). In the context of the rights of religious minorities, moderate Muslims according to RAND must support equal citizenship and legal rights for non-Muslims. The implications of this characteristic are very broad, it does not simply demand social justice towards non-Muslims, something that is demanded by Islam itself, but demands acceptance of a framework of religious pluralism which essentially denies the normative privilege of the sharia in ordinary life. By combining the issues of women's rights and religious pluralism in one feature, RAND effectively made rejection of traditional Islamic jurisprudence a condition for being recognized as a moderate Muslim.

The fourth characteristic is opposition to terrorism and illegitimate violence. In the end, this characteristic seems natural, Rabasa et al. (2007) himself admits that moderate Muslims, like adherents of other religious traditions, have a concept of just war. He cited Mansur Escudero, head of FEERI in Spain, who stated that Islam justified the defensive use of violence to protect Muslims against invaders, but that violence against civilians and suicide operations were unlawful. However, if examined more deeply, the definitions of "terrorism" and "unlawful violence" in the RAND framework are selective. What RAND wants is the rejection of armed jihad that threatens the interests of the United

States and its allies, opposition to US foreign policy in the Islamic world, and support for resistance movements classified as "terrorist" by Washington. On the other hand, violence committed against Muslims by parties allied with the US does not fall within the scope of "unlawful violence" that needs to be rejected. This means that this fourth characteristic functions indirectly as a mechanism to cripple the legitimacy of Muslim resistance to the injustice they experience, by labeling any Muslim who justifies armed resistance under certain circumstances as "immoderate" (Muammar, 2006).

When these four characteristics are seen as a whole, there is one clear common thread, they all lead to the formation of Muslims who are willing to accept the world order as desired by the United States, namely a privatized Islam, which does not demand the sovereignty of the sharia, which accepts the equality of all religions and all legal systems, and which does not offer resistance that is considered to threaten Western interests. This is the essence of "moderation" in the RAND Corporation's geopolitical framework, which is very different from the Islamic concept of *wasatiyyah* which is based on the normative principles of the Al-Qur'an and Sunnah.

It needs to be emphasized that the concept of "moderation" formulated by the RAND Corporation is very different from the understanding of *wasatiyyah* in the Islamic scientific tradition. Yusuf al-Qaradawi defines *wasatiyyah* as a middle way that prevents Muslims from exaggerating (*ghuluww*) and underestimating (*taqshir*) in religion, while still adhering to the valid principles of Islamic faith and sharia (Al-Qaradawi, 1997, 2022). Islamic *wasatiyyah* does not require compromise on faith or acceptance of religious pluralism, it is a moderation grounded in the normative foundations of Islam (Hoir, 2023; Saumantri, 2022). Thus, it can be argued that the RAND Corporation has engaged in what could be called "conceptual piracy," taking terms that have a positive resonance in the Islamic tradition (moderation, *wasatiyyah*) and infusing them with ideological content alien from an Islamic perspective. This makes RAND's strategy an intervention in the realm of Islamic religious discourse.

The Goal of the RAND Corporation in Building a Moderate Muslim Networks

To understand why the RAND Corporation is so serious about designing a moderate Muslim network, it is necessary to first understand the strategic framework behind both reports. Both *Civil Democratic Islam* (2003) and *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (2007) start from the same premise, that Islamic radicalism is a major threat to the interests of the United States and its allies, and that the most effective way to weaken this radicalism is not solely through military force, but through a war of ideas within the Muslim community itself (Benard, 2003; Mukmin et al., 2025). This approach reflects a shift in the United States' geopolitical strategy that places ideological intervention as the primary instrument for reconstructing the dynamics of religious thought in the Islamic world for the benefit of its national security.

Rabasa et al. (2007) emphatically stated that the struggle in much of the Muslim world today is a war of ideas. He added that this war is not between Islam and the West, but between Islam and Islam, that is, between those who support liberal values and those who reject them. This statement reveals the true aim of RAND's strategy, to foster internal divisions within the Muslim community by empowering one group (the so-called "moderates") to weaken the other (the so-called "fundamentalists" or "radicals") (Abdurrahman & Al Hakim, 2025). The essence of this strategy is an attempt to divide the currents of thought within the Muslim community by supporting certain groups so that they can suppress those considered radical.

Ismail (2009) maps out the RAND Corporation's goals in more detail. According to him, RAND's strategy basically has three main, interrelated targets. First, preventing the rise of political Islam. The RAND Corporation seeks to prevent the emergence of Islamic political forces aiming to implement sharia law or establish a state based on Islamic principles. This stems from Western concerns following the 1979 Iranian Revolution that political Islam could threaten the geopolitical order that favors the interests of the United States and its allies in the Middle East and Asia. Therefore, the primary objective of RAND's strategy is to stem the rise of political Islam, which is perceived as having the potential to challenge the global geopolitical order that favors the interests of the United States and its allies.

Second, constructing a counter-narrative against radical Islam. This goal is to develop a counter-narrative that can weaken the appeal of Islamic groups that reject the Western liberal order. To do this, RAND needs Islamic figures and organizations willing to act as spokespeople for liberal values within Muslim communities, acting as insiders who articulate external agendas (Rabasa et al., 2007). This goal is to support modernists in debating fundamentalists using religious arguments acceptable to the Muslim community. This strategy aims to create a counter-narrative by utilizing Islamic figures and organizations capable of articulating liberal values as the basis for arguments in debating fundamentalist groups.

Third, expanding the influence of liberal democratic values. This long-term goal is to expand the influence of Western values of liberal democracy, pluralism, and human rights into Muslim societies. The *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* report firmly states that the US stands to gain numerous benefits from the spread of these values,

including values of equity, tolerance, pluralism, the rule of law, and human rights (Benard, 2003). Within this framework, moderate Muslim networks serve as agents of value change, working from within Muslim communities themselves.

Thus, the RAND Corporation's goal is not merely security-oriented in the narrow sense (preventing terrorism), but rather transformative in the broader sense, namely, changing the face of Islam from within, making it a religion compatible with, and in the long term, subordinate to, the liberal order led by the United States. Thus, the RAND Corporation's agenda is not merely limited to security issues, but seeks to transform Islamic thought from within to make it more compatible with the global liberal order.

The RAND Corporation's Strategy for Building a Moderate Muslim Network

To achieve these goals, the RAND Corporation formulated a series of detailed and operational strategies. These strategies targeted various segments of Muslim society and utilized various channels of influence, from education to the mass media. These operational strategies were systematically designed to infiltrate social and intellectual structures in order to reshape the landscape of Muslim thought along Western lines. In *Civil Democratic Islam*, Benard (2003) divides Muslims into four categories: fundamentalists, traditionalists, modernists, and secularists.

Table 2. *Classification of Muslims According to the RAND Corporation*

Classification	Ideology & Main Characteristics
Fundamentalist	Totally reject democratic values and contemporary Western culture. They demand the establishment of an authoritarian and puritanical state that implements extreme interpretations of Islamic law. Divided into two: scriptural (based on traditional theology) and radical (autodidactic, often ignoring orthodoxy in favor of a political vision).
Traditionalist	Want a society that is conservative and suspicious of modernity and innovation. They focus on maintaining orthodox norms and conservative behavior. Divided into conservatives (rejecting change) and reformists (willing to make careful adaptations to maintain the relevance of Islam).
Modernist	Striving to make the Islamic world part of global modernity by reforming Islam to be in line with the demands of the times. They emphasize values such as individual freedom, equality, and social responsibility in harmony with international democratic norms.
Secularist	Demanding a separation between religion (church/mosque) and the state, where religion is limited to the private space of individuals. Although their values are closest to those of the West, their positions are often weak and are sometimes nationalist or anti-American for political reasons.

Each of these four categories is treated differently in RAND's strategy. For modernists, RAND recommends full support; for traditionalists, RAND recommends a selective approach to separate them from fundamentalists; for secularists, RAND supports them as long-term partners; and for fundamentalists, RAND recommends active resistance.

In more detail, RAND's strategy encompasses five main areas (Ismail, 2009). First, the education strategy. RAND recommends direct intervention in the Islamic education system, including: incorporating a secular curriculum into Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and Islamic schools (*madrasah*); encouraging the teaching of democratic values and pluralism in Islamic educational institutions; establishing or supporting research centers that develop interpretations of Islam compatible with liberal values; and providing scholarships and study opportunities at Western universities to young Muslim scholars with the potential to become moderate figures (Rabasa et al., 2007).

Second, media strategy. The RAND report recommends developing and funding moderate media (in RAND's sense) as an effort to stem the dominance of media deemed conservative or anti-democratic. This includes: sponsoring radio, television, and news portals that disseminate interpretations of Islam that align with liberal values; supporting moderate journalists and writers; and strengthening digital platforms that provide space for moderate Muslim voices (Benard, 2003). RAND's media strategy focuses on funding information channels and empowering public figures who can promote liberal interpretations of Islam, as a systematic effort to counteract conservative narratives in the public sphere.

Third, a strategy through civil society organizations. RAND recommends building a network of civil society organizations capable of serving as a permanent infrastructure for the dissemination of moderate values. This includes think tanks, women's rights advocacy groups, youth organizations, and Muslim professional associations willing to work within a framework of liberal values. *The Building Moderate Muslim Networks* report specifically names The Asia Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the

National Democratic Institute (NDI) as organizations tasked with implementing this agenda on the ground (Rabasa et al., 2007).

Fourth, strategies for women's groups. One strategy that received special attention in the RAND report was the empowerment of Muslim women's groups. The report identified women's groups advocating for gender equality as strategic partners that needed active support. This was because RAND considered the issue of gender equality to be one of the most effective avenues for weakening the authority of traditional Islamic jurisprudence (Ismail, 2009). The primary focus of this strategy was to utilize the issue of gender equality as a catalyst for degrading the authority of traditional Islamic jurisprudence through active support for women's groups aligned with the liberal agenda.

Fifth, the strategy of internal division. The final and most sensitive strategy is to foster divisions among Islamic groups. Benard (2003) explicitly recommends that the US work to sharpen the differences between traditionalists and fundamentalists, prevent their fusion, and encourage internal competition within fundamentalist groups themselves. This strategy reflects the classic divide-and-rule approach applied in a religious context (Barton, 1999). It essentially employs divide-and-rule tactics by pitting traditionalists and fundamentalists against each other and fueling internal rivalries to weaken the strength of the Muslim community.

Implementation of the RAND Strategy in Indonesia

Indonesia is one of the countries directly targeted by the RAND Corporation's strategy, although it differs from Malaysia. In Indonesia, the implementation of the RAND Corporation's strategy is more extensive and well-documented than in Malaysia, given the scale of Indonesia's Muslim population and the plurality of Islamic organizations there. Rabasa et al. (2007) in the *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* report explicitly names seven Indonesian figures, including Ahmad Syafii Maarif (former Chairman of Muhammadiyah), Azyumardi Azra (Rector of UIN), and Ulil Abshar-Abdalla (coordinator of the Liberal Islam Network/JIL).

Husaini (2002) documents that the Liberal Islam Network (JIL), founded in 2001, became a key organization in Indonesia's liberal Islamic ecosystem, supported by international networks. JIL promoted ideas closely aligned with the RAND agenda: religious pluralism, sharia liberalization, deconstruction of the authority of the Al-Qur'an, and secularism. Ismail (2009) notes that the RAND Corporation report identified several categories of institutions in Indonesia as infrastructure for moderate Muslim networks:

- a. *Pesantren* and *Madrasah*: The majority are under the auspices of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, where secular curriculum has been incorporated into their religious education systems.
- b. Islamic Higher Education: State Islamic University (UIN), formerly IAIN, with more than one hundred thousand students, as well as Muhammadiyah universities, are said to be institutions that have adopted the ideas of pluralism and democracy.
- c. Mass Media: An Islamic radio network entitled "Liberal Religion and Tolerance" whose dialogue transcripts were distributed by more than seventy media outlets, including the Jawa Post.
- d. Democracy Institution: Lakspedam (NU institution) which is active in voter education, sponsored by The Asia Foundation and Ford Foundation.
- e. Regional Network: The International Center for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP), sponsored by the Ford Foundation, serves as a platform for the dissemination of moderate Muslim ideas throughout Southeast Asia.

The RAND report specifically cited The Asia Foundation as the most successful organization in carrying out its mission, thus making its modus operandi a model for spreading liberal democratic values in the Islamic world (Rabasa et al., 2007). The Asia Foundation itself receives funding from the US government through the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department, a relationship that does not conceal that the organization is an instrument of US foreign policy. Ismail (2009) also documented a statement by Donald Rumsfeld, the former US Secretary of Defense, who bluntly stated: "The United States needs to create a financial aid agency to transform the Islamic education curriculum from radical to moderate." This statement confirms that intervention in the Islamic education system is a deliberate policy, not merely coincidental. Therefore, the involvement of foreign actors in this curriculum reform indicates a structured effort to instill liberal values through formal channels.

Implementation of the RAND Strategy in Malaysia

a. Recognition of Malaysian Figures in the RAND Corporation Report

Rabasa et al. (2007) explicitly names Anwar Ibrahim, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, as the only Malaysian figure directly thanked in the report's acknowledgements section. At the time of the report's publication, Anwar Ibrahim was teaching at Georgetown University in the United States, a university closely linked to the US foreign policy intellectual network. This fact is not merely biographical, it reflects the active involvement of Southeast Asian Muslim figures with liberal orientations and connections to Western institutions in the RAND strategy formulation process.

The mention of these figures in the official report of a think tank with direct ties to the US Department of Defense clearly implies that certain individuals within the Malaysian Islamic ecosystem were identified as strategic assets whose value and influence needed to be nurtured and developed within the moderate Muslim network agenda. Ismail (2009) notes that no other Malaysian names were included in the report, a fact that demonstrates the selective nature of RAND's strategic partner selection.

Regionally, the RAND report also mentions several individuals from Singapore and the Philippines who have ties to academic networks and think tanks active in Malaysia, including Ambassador Tommy Koh of Singapore and several figures from Islamic organizations in the Philippines (Rabasa et al., 2007). These networks are not isolated country-by-country, but rather interconnected as a mutually reinforcing regional ecosystem. Through these connections, cooperation between these individuals and organizations forms a strategic entity capable of expanding the influence of the moderation agenda throughout Southeast Asia. These cross-border relationships demonstrate that the network's formation was collectively designed to ensure the continued massive dissemination of moderate ideas regionally.

b. Organizations in Malaysia that Receive Foreign Funding and Their Relationship with RAND

The study from Ismail (2009) and Muammar (2006) allows mapping of several main organizational groups in Malaysia that can be identified as having a connection, whether in terms of funding, agenda, or terminology, with the strategy formulated by the RAND Corporation. First, Sisters in Islam (SIS). This is the most widely documented organization in the context of this study. It is a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded in Malaysia and committed to fighting for women's rights within an Islamic framework, but with interpretations that conflict with conventional Islamic jurisprudence. In terms of funding, Ismail (2009) documents that SIS has received financial support from several institutions directly mentioned or associated with the network described in the RAND report:

1. Ford Foundation: An organization that consistently funds democracy and civil society in Muslim countries, and which is also mentioned in the RAND report as one of the funding sources for moderate Muslim networks in Southeast Asia.
2. Oxfam Novib: A Dutch humanitarian organization that funds women's rights advocacy programs in an Islamic context.
3. Global Fund for Women: A US institution that specifically funds women's movements in developing countries, including movements aimed at changing Islamic family law.
4. The Sigrid Rausing Trust: A European philanthropic institution that funds human rights advocacy, including in an Islamic context.
5. Hivos: A Dutch institution that funds humanitarian and secular programs in developing countries.

In March 2007, SIS together with the above institutions initiated the formation of the Musawah movement, an international network that fights for equality and justice in Muslim families. This movement involved activists and scholars from eleven countries, with SIS as the main founder (Ismail, 2009). In terms of agenda, there is a very clear correspondence between the SIS program and the characteristics of moderate Muslims defined by the RAND Corporation. Rabasa et al. (2007) explicitly states that women's groups fighting for gender equality are one of the key strategic partner categories that need support. The SIS agenda, which includes opposition to polygamy, opposition to the implementation of hudud, and demands for equality in Islamic family law, is directly aligned with RAND's recommendations about the importance of empowering women's groups to undermine traditional Islamic jurisprudence. Ismail (2009) documents in detail several SIS lay positions that conflict with conventional Islamic jurisprudence:

1. Opposing the Federal Territory Islamic Family Bill (*pindaan* 2005) on the grounds that it "wrongs women," even though the bill is within the framework of Islamic law.
2. Opposing the Terengganu Sharia Crime Bill (*hudud*) by raising the issue of protecting victims of robbery as a reason to reject the implementation of *hudud* in its entirety.
3. Carrying out an open monogamy campaign, contrary to the polygamy law approved by the Al-Qur'an.
4. Promoting interpretation of the Al-Qur'an using hermeneutical methodology derived from the Western tradition of Bible criticism.

This alignment between the SIS agenda and RAND's definition of moderate Muslims is no coincidence. It reflects that SIS operates within the same value framework promoted by the RAND Corporation, one that positions liberal democratic values as the benchmark for Islamic interpretation. This similarity suggests that the local organization adopts the same external standards in formulating religious understandings at the domestic level.

The next organization is the Malaysian Interfaith Network (MIN). This organization was established on February 15, 2003, specifically to advance the agenda of religious pluralism in Malaysia. MIN has twenty affiliated

bodies, including various non-Muslim organizations and several liberal Muslim individuals. In terms of funding, MIN receives funding from The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, which is sponsored by the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation (Ismail, 2009). These two institutions (the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation) are among the US philanthropists most active in funding democracy and civil society programs in Muslim countries, and both are directly or indirectly linked to the funding networks mentioned in the RAND Corporation report. MIN also receives support from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF), a foundation based in Germany that has been operating in Malaysia for over thirty years. KAF was one of the Guiding Committees for the "Towards the Formation of the Interfaith Commission of Malaysia" conference which took place on 24–25 February 2005 at the Equatorial Hotel Bangi, Selangor (Muammar, 2006).

MIN's most concrete agenda is the proposal to establish an Interfaith Commission (IFC), which was originally called the Inter Religious Council (IRC). This body is intended to function like a court whose decisions are final in all matters between religions. If this proposal is successfully implemented, it will effectively reduce the power of sharia courts in handling cases involving Muslims. Ismail (2009) documented fourteen matters contained in the MCCBCHS memorandum to the Attorney General's Council dated 21 August 2001, which became the basis for the IFC's recommendations. Among the most problematic matters from an Islamic perspective:

1. Muslims should be given the right to apostasy without having to go through a sharia court.
2. A child born to Muslim parents should not automatically become a Muslim.
3. Non-Muslims who embrace Islam should be given the freedom to return to their original religion without any legal action.
4. Non-Muslims do not need to adhere to Islam if they want to marry a Muslim, and Muslims can leave Islam without being subject to any legal action.
5. The share of inheritance between sons and daughters should be equal.

If based on the characteristics of moderate Muslims according to RAND, especially the commitment to religious pluralism and rejection of sharia as public law, then the IFC proposal with its fourteen cases is the most concrete and systematic implementation of this agenda in the Malaysian context (Rabasa et al., 2007). Foreign support for IFC reserves is not purely philanthropic. It is part of a larger strategy to make Malaysia a model Muslim country that embraces religious pluralism, a model that can then be disseminated to other Muslim countries (Ismail, 2009).

Apart from NGOs, the RAND Corporation's strategy in Malaysia also targets academic and higher education institutions. Educational institutions are one of the most effective channels for the long-term spread of moderate values, as they influence the younger generation of Muslims at their most impressionable ages. In Malaysia, this manifests in several forms. First, the development of hermeneutical studies and critical studies of the Al-Qur'an in several public universities, including the use of exegetical methodologies influenced by Western academic traditions. Second, the inclusion of Malaysian liberal figures in international academic networks funded by Western institutions. Third, publishing books and articles that promote liberal Islamic interpretations among students and lay people (Ismail, 2009).

c. Response of Malaysian Islamic Scholars and Institutions to This Agenda

It is important to note that the spread of the liberal Islamic agenda in Malaysia has not occurred without opposition. Malaysian Islamic clerics and institutions have provided a firm and well-documented response, proving that they recognize the ideological nature behind this movement. At the fatwa level, the 74th *Muzakarah* of the Fatwa Committee, National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia decided that the liberal school of thought was heretical and a deviation from Islamic Sharia. This decision was later confirmed by the Resolutions of the 2006 Ulama *Muzakarah* which stated that the Liberal Islamic school of thought and the understanding of religious pluralism were serious and dangerous deviations which were part of the *al-ghazw al-fikrî* (thought attack) agenda masterminded by orientalist (Ismail, 2009). The resolution identifies in detail five ways this sect undermines the Islamic faith (Muzakarah Jawatankuasa Fatwa, 2006):

1. Defaming the purity of monotheism as the core of Islamic *aqidah*.
2. Contesting the absoluteness of the Al-Qur'an as God's revelation.
3. Contesting the apostolic dignity and personal nobility of the Prophet Muhammad.
4. Contesting the authority of the Sunnah and *ijma'* ulama.
5. Challenging the superiority of sharia and its sovereignty.

This institutional response shows that Malaysian ulama were able to correctly identify that what was being set in motion was not simply an academic debate about the methodology of interpretation, but rather a deliberate attack on the principles of Islamic epistemology and creed. The emergence of IFC proposals and the liberal Islamic movement in Malaysia needs to be seen in a broader context as part of a geopolitical strategy that has been previously designed at the international level. Apart from the fatwa, opposition also came from various non-governmental Islamic

organizations (Islamic NGOs). Ismail noted that the emergence of ACCIN (Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs) was a direct response to the IFC proposal, where Islamic organizations united in stating that the establishment of the IFC would harm the Islamic religion in several critical aspects (Ismail, 2009). Therefore, the mobilization of support from various Islamic organizations confirms the existence of a shared stance in defending the sovereignty of religious institutions from external influences.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the RAND Corporation's strategy in forming a moderate Muslim network is not just a security project that is reactive to the threat of terrorism, but is a planned, systematic and long-term geopolitical program. Within the framework of this strategy, "moderation" is defined not based on Islamic *wasatiyyah* traditions rooted in the scholarship of the Al-Qur'an and Sunnah, but rather based on ideological alignment with Western liberal democratic values. Four main conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, the RAND Corporation's conception of moderate Muslims is instrumental and geopolitical, it is designed to separate potential Muslim allies from perceived threats, not to support the development of an authentic Islam. The four characteristics identified by RAND all point to the privatization and weakening of Islam as a normative force in public life.

Second, the RAND Corporation's strategy is implemented through a structured network of institutions and funding. In Malaysia, this involves NGOs such as Sisters in Islam and the Malaysian Interfaith Network, which receive support from the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and other Western institutions. In Indonesia, this infrastructure includes JIL, ICIP, and various media and educational institutions that receive funding from The Asia Foundation and USAID. The shared agendas between RAND's recommendations and the programs of these organizations reflect the existence of a coordinated network. Third, this study finds that RAND's strategy has been partially successful in influencing Islamic discourse in the archipelago, particularly in introducing the terminology and agenda of religious liberalism into academic discourse and Islamic media. However, resistance from Islamic scholars and organizations remains strong, as evidenced by the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) fatwas in Indonesia (Majlis Ulama Indonesia, 2005) and the decisions of the ulama's deliberations in Malaysia that firmly reject religious pluralism, liberalism, and secularism.

Fourth, the fundamental distinction between authentic moderation as defined by Islamic *wasatiyyah* and the geopolitically constructed moderation of RAND needs to be further clarified. *Wasatiyyah*, according to Islamic scholarly tradition, does not require compromise on faith, it represents a balance based on sound Islamic normative principles. Moderation, as defined by RAND, instead demands that Muslims devote themselves to a system of values derived from outside the Islamic tradition itself. As a practical implication, this study recommends that Muslims, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia, develop critical literacy regarding the discourse of moderation and liberal Islam circulating in the public sphere. Islamic educational institutions and fatwa bodies need to continue playing an active role in providing a balanced religious orientation to the public, as well as in critically evaluating programs that claim to promote moderation but ultimately pursue agendas that contradict Islamic principles.

Future research could focus on a more in-depth empirical study of the flow of funding from US and Western institutions to Islamic organizations in Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as a content analysis of the academic and media products produced by these networks. Comparative studies of the concept of *wasatiyyah* in various schools of contemporary Islamic thought would also enrich our understanding of authentic Islamic moderation.

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