

QUR'ANIC REINTERPRETATION IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA AND MALAYSIA: A RESPONSE TO RADICAL ISLAMIC DISCOURSE^(*)

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia and Malaysia, as Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia, face significant challenges from radical interpretations of the *Glorious Qur'an*, including literalist, liberal, deviant, contextualist, and hermeneutic approaches. These radical interpretations have fueled ideological polarization, sectarian conflict, and religious extremism, threatening social cohesion and national stability. This study addresses the pressing issue of how moderate Qur'anic reinterpretation can counteract these radical narratives and provide a framework for peaceful coexistence and religious harmony. The research aims to examine and compare the roles of two distinct actors: M. Quraish Shihab, a prominent Indonesian exegete whose contextual hermeneutics advocate *wasatiyyah* (moderation), and key Malaysian religious institutions such as JAKIM, State Muftis, and the National *Fatwa* Council, which institutionalize moderate interpretations through systemic frameworks. Using a qualitative, comparative, and multidisciplinary methodology, the study draws upon primary sources, including Shihab's *Tafsir al-Mishbah* and thematic works, official *khutbahs*, *fatwas*, and policy documents. Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was applied to explore how these reinterpretations function as counter-discourses to radical ideologies, with particular focus on themes such as *fitna* (discord), *awliya'* (leadership and

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alliances), and gender relations. The findings reveal that while Shihab's scholarly charisma and contextual approach foster intellectual engagement and voluntary acceptance among the public, Malaysian institutions use state-backed religious mechanisms to embed moderate Qur'anic interpretations into official policies, education systems, and legal structures. Both models reject ahistorical literalism and radical extremism by emphasizing *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law) and promoting civic harmony. However, their approaches differ: Shihab's method excels in depth and nuance but lacks enforcement power, whereas Malaysia's institutional framework ensures nationwide reach but risks politicizing religious discourse. In spite that, both should be applauded for the sanctity of the Qur'an.

Keywords: *Qur'anic Reinterpretation, Radical Islamic Discourse, Wasatiyyah (Moderation), Religious Authority, Contextual Tafsir, Southeast Asia*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, has become a focal point in the global discourse on Islamic moderation (Muhtador & Ulya, 2024) and the challenges of religious extremism. While the region has long been recognized for its pluralistic and culturally embedded expressions of Islam (Thayer, 2008), it has not been immune to the spread of radical Islamic ideologies. These developments have raised concerns among scholars, policymakers, and religious leaders who are increasingly advocating for renewed engagement with the Qur'an as a means of promoting inclusive and contextually grounded interpretations (Muhtador & Ulya, 2024). In response, both Indonesia and Malaysia have witnessed significant reinterpretative efforts aimed at countering radical discourse and reasserting Islamic teachings that align with national identity, social cohesion, and democratic values (Barton et al., 2021; Ibrahim, 2022).

Indonesia, a country characterized by remarkable religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, has the largest Muslim population in the world (Pedersen, 2016). The Islamic discourse within the nation is multifaceted, with orientations that range from radical to liberal (Bustamam-Ahmad, 2011; Maksun et al., 2022). Radical groups such as *Hizbut Tabrir Indonesia* (HTI) and *Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia* (MMI) reject democratic systems, advocating instead for divine sovereignty (*hākimiyyah*) and literalist interpretations of Islamic texts

(Ahnaf, 2011). More so, they denounced the democratic system, because it has been regarded as a symbol of “the power of people,” while in their view, Islam only recognizes the power or sovereignty of God (Wahid, 2014). In contrast, liberal thinkers, such as Ulil Abshar-Abdalla and the *Jaringan Islam Liberal* (JIL), have called for reformist approaches (Ali, 2005), even suggesting the need for a critical edition of the Qur'an (Zarkasyi, 2008). Between these polarized camps stands a growing current of moderate Islamic thought, supported by prominent religious scholars and organizations, who seek to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. Among the most influential of these figures is M. Quraish Shihab (Andriawan, 2021), whose *Tafsir al-Misbah* exemplifies a contextual and harmonious interpretation of the Qur'an aimed at bridging sectarian divides and promoting national unity (Andriawan, 2021).

Shihab's works have gathered wide popularity among Indonesian Muslims for their accessibility, intellectual depth, and commitment to moderation (Ikhwan, 2015). His interpretation of sensitive Qur'anic verses, such as those on *fitna* (conflict or war), *awliyā'* (allies or protectors) in (Qur'an 4: 51), and gender relations in (Qur'an 4: 1), has attracted both praise and criticism (Aiyub & Mutia, 2023). Some traditional scholars view him as overly liberal or even deviant; others regard him as a distinguished authority whose interpretations reflect a deep mastery of Islamic sciences and a commitment to ethical and pluralistic values (Rijal, 2020). This spectrum of responses highlights the ideological tensions within contemporary Islamic discourse in Indonesia. However, scholarly research to date, such as Anshari (Anshari, 2006), Hasani Ahmad Said (Said, 2014), Yunus, Sidik, and Kamaruddin (Fitri Yunus et al., 2019), (Djidin & Syamsuddin, 2019), and (Arifin et al., 2020), have paid insufficient attention to Shihab's broader role as a religious authority shaping moderate Islamic narratives. Existing studies, as earlier pointed out, have often focused narrowly on the content of his *tafsir*, overlooking the institutional and societal impact of his interpretive work in countering radicalism; hence, it is one of the utmost objectives of this study.

Moreover, prevailing scholarship on Indonesian *'ulamā'* tends to reduce their role to political affiliations or institutional functions. Analysts such as Martin van Bruinessen have categorized groups like the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI) as “government scholars,” implying limited independence (Van Bruinessen, 1990). While such critiques hold partial validity, they underestimate the broader social recognition and intellectual influence these scholars command. In this context, M. Quraish Shihab's role extends beyond formal institutions; he represents an intellectual and spiritual bridge among competing Islamic ideologies. His authority is not merely institutional but rooted in widespread public credibility. Despite this, much academic research that has been conducted

so far, such as articles by Hyslop (2016), Marzouki (2015), Buijs et al. (2014), Lähdesmäki (2013), Westerlund (2012), (Westerlund, 2012), and book chapters authored by De Kerangat (2017) has not touched objects related to scriptural interpretation as a tool for constructing counter-discourses to extremism. While some studies, such as Aris Arif Mundayat's dissertation on political ritual and discourse (Mundayat, 2005), offer valuable insights, they do not sufficiently address how Qur'anic interpretation itself serves as a foundational platform for challenging radical ideologies.

In Malaysia, similar efforts have been institutionalized through state-sanctioned religious bodies such as JAKIM, State Muftis, Fatwa Committees, and Islamic departments in public universities (Rosidi, 2024). These institutions promote Qur'anic interpretations aligned with national development goals, multicultural coexistence, and moderate Islamic thought under the banner of *Islam Rahmatan lil-'Ālamīn* (Islam as a mercy to all creation) and Malaysia Madani (Abdullah, 2022). Through sermons (*khutbahs*), educational curricula, and public initiatives, Malaysia's religious authorities are systematically countering extremist ideologies while reinforcing the compatibility of Islamic teachings with democratic governance and constitutional principles (Quraishi, 2020).

Given the preceding discussion and reviews of various relevant literature, it might be understood that Indonesia and Malaysia serve as regional models of how contemporary Muslim societies can reinterpret sacred texts to address modern ideological challenges while remaining anchored in tradition as enshrined in the original texts, the Glorious Qur'an and Hadith of the Prophet (*Sallallahu Alaihi wa Sallam*). Their experiences contribute to a wider global movement seeking to reclaim Islamic discourse from extremist distortion and to reassert the Qur'an's relevance in promoting justice, peace, and pluralism. As critical sites of religious reform and innovation, both countries offer practical and theological blueprints for other Muslim-majority nations confronting similar threats of radicalization and religious polarization.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative, and multidisciplinary approach to examine how Qur'anic reinterpretation is employed in Indonesia and Malaysia as a strategic response to the rise of radical Islamic discourse. The research focuses on key religious actors, institutions, and exegetical texts in both countries, with particular emphasis on M. Quraish Shihab in Indonesia and major Malaysian religious institutions such as JAKIM, State Muftis, Fatwa Committees, and

Islamic departments at public universities. It should be noted that Quraish Shihab was selected because of the role he played as a great scholar who introduced a modern approach to challenge the radical interpretation of the Qur'an, as various scholars have recommended him, even though others opine negatively. The religious authorities in Malaysia were purposely selected because of the close monitoring of the religious affairs taking place in the country, especially JAKIM, for their unwavering support of the government to filter and scrutinize any kind of reinterpretation of the Qur'an. Such efforts by religious authorities were considered a response to radical interpretations. In analyzing the data collected, this study employed the method of presenting the results and discussions concurrently, in the sense that results and discussions dealing with Indonesia come first, followed by the Malaysian data. Then, both data sets were comparatively analyzed to showcase the roles of Shihab Quraish and the Malaysian religious authorities mentioned earlier in counter-discourse as a response to the radical interpretation of the Glorious Qur'an.

2.1 Data Sources and Scope

In conducting this study, for Indonesia, the data are primarily drawn from the exegetical works and public discourse of M. Quraish Shihab, especially his seminal tafsir *Tafsir al-Misbah* and *Ayat-ayat Fitna: Sekelumit Keadaban Islam di Tengah Purbasangka*. For Malaysia, the study analyzes institutional materials including official khutbahs (sermons), policy statements, fatwas, and educational publications produced by key Islamic authorities such as JAKIM and state religious councils. These sources collectively represent the moderate Islamic narratives promoted by religious leadership in both national contexts. EndNote was used as a database for generating all the references in this study.

2.2 Analytical Methods

This section details the analysis of various methodologies applied in analyzing the collected data. Therefore, the analysis is carried out in the following approaches:

2.2.1 Tafsir Studies and Comparative Qur'anic Interpretation

The study first engages in textual and thematic analysis of Shihab's tafsir and compares it with interpretations found in Malaysian religious discourse. This includes how both Indonesian and Malaysian interpreters deal with sensitive Qur'anic themes such as *fitna* (discord/conflict), *awliya'* (authority/friendship), and gender issues. The goal is to identify how these interpretations construct a *moderate, contextual, and inclusive* understanding of the Qur'an in contrast to

rigid or literalist approaches found in radical Islamic movements. This comparative analysis highlights similarities and differences in theological tone, methodology, and social objectives across both countries.

2.2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Van Dijk's CDA

In both cases, Qur'anic reinterpretation is treated not just as textual analysis but as discursive practice. The study examines how these reinterpretations function as counter-discourses within their socio-political environments, responding to the influence of radical groups such as *Hizbut Tabrir Indonesia* (HTI), *Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia* (MMI), and various hardline movements in Malaysia. Van Dijk's CDA approach views discourse as a multidimensional structure shaped by the interplay of text, cognition, and society (Van Dijk, 2015). From this perspective, the existence of such linkages between discourses, power, domination, and social injustice is always found. Power involves control of actions and knowledge in the form of dominance (Van Dijk, 1993). There is a close connection in the "discourse-cognition-society triangle". Social cognition (socio-cognitive), as the key to Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, can be racism or injustice, while it becomes an unconscious ideology (Van Dijk, 2001). This allows the researcher to explore how religious discourse is constructed, legitimized, and disseminated, particularly in relation to power, ideology, and social control.

From this perspective, Qur'anic discourse is analyzed not only as a product (the text) but as a process of knowledge production embedded within institutional authority, political context, and public consciousness. By applying CDA, the study unpacks how these interpretations serve to deconstruct extremist ideologies and reclaim the Qur'anic message in the service of moderation (*wasatiyyah*), pluralism, and national harmony.

2.2.3 Comparative and Contextual Integration

Through a comparative lens, the study evaluates how religious authority operates differently in both contexts: as a charismatic-exegetical figure in Indonesia (Shihab), and as institutional collectives in Malaysia (JAKIM and allied bodies). It assesses the form, intent, and impact of Qur'anic reinterpretation in shaping public understanding, countering radicalism, and reinforcing Islamic values compatible with democratic and multicultural societies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results derived from the reviewed literature in alignment with the targeted objectives. The findings focus on the two study areas mentioned earlier. It is important to note that the discussion, as previously indicated, is

closely linked to the results. Consequently, the discussion explores the analysis of these results, as outlined in the following subheadings.

3.1.1 *The Role Shihab's Interpretation of the Verses of Fitna for the Centering of Moderate Islam*

In his exegetical work, *Ayat-ayat Fitna: Sekelumit Keadaban Islam di Tengah Purbasangka* (The *Fitna*-Verses: A Glimpse of Islam's Civility Amid Prejudice), he interprets five verses on *fitna* (Al-Anfal 8: 60, Al-Nisa 4: 56, Muhammad 47: 4, Al-Nisa 4: 89, and Al-Anfal 8: 39). The first verse is the most crucial to be interpreted. The verse reads as follows:

وَأَعِدُّوا لَهُمْ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ مِنْ قُوَّةٍ وَمِنْ رِبَاطِ الْخَيْلِ تُرْهَبُونَ بِهِ عَدُوَّ اللَّهِ وَعَدُوَّكُمْ
وَأَٰخَرِينَ مِنْ دُونِهِمْ لَا تَعْلَمُوهُمْ اللَّهُ يَعْلَمُهُمْ ۗ وَمَا تُنْفِقُوا مِنْ شَيْءٍ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ
يُوفَّ إِلَيْكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

And provide against them power that you can and war mounts you can muster so that you might deter thereby the enemies of God and your enemies, and others besides them of whom you may be unaware, (but) of whom God is aware, and whatever you may expend in God's cause shall be repaid to you in full, and you shall not be wronged'. (Al-Anfal 8: 60)

According to Shihab, the phrase '*turhibūna*' could not be interpreted as 'you make terror'. The word '*irhāb*', which has the same root as the phrase in modern Arabic, is translated as 'terror'. However, in his opinion, despite the same derivation, the two words have different meanings. The Qur'anic usage of the phrase is very different from the common usage of the *irhāb*, owing to two main reasons. First, from semantic analysis, in contrast to its modern usage, the phrase *turhibūna* connotes making fearsome to 'enemies of the religion of God and enemies of societies'. Second, from intertextual analysis, this verse should be understood in an integral continuation of preceding verses (Al-Anfal 8: 55-59)

إِنَّ شَرَّ الدَّوَابِّ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾ الَّذِينَ عَاهَدتْ مِنْهُمْ
ثُمَّ يَنْقُضُونَ عَهْدَهُمْ فِي كُلِّ مَرَّةٍ وَهُمْ لَا يَتَّقُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾ فإِذَا تَتَفَقَّهُمْ فِي الْحَرْبِ
فَشَرَّدَ بِهِمْ مَن خَلْفَهُمْ لَعَنَهُمْ يَدَّكِرُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾ وَإِذَا تَخَافَنَّ مِنْ قَوْمٍ خِيَانَةً فَانْبِذْ إِلَيْهِمْ
عَلَىٰ سِوَاءِ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْخَائِنِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾ وَلَا يَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا
سَبَقُوا ۗ إِنَّهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

‘Indeed, the vilest creatures in the sight of God are unbelievers, because they do not believe (55), namely for those with whom thou hast made a covenant, and who thereupon break their covenant on every occasion, not being conscious of God (56). If thou find them at war (with you), make of them a fearsome example for those who follow them, that they might take it to heart (57), or, if thou hast reason to fear treachery from people (with whom thou hast made a covenant). Cast it back at them in an equitable manner, for God does love the treacherous! (58). And let them not think- those who are bent on disbelief- that they shall escape (God): behold, they can never frustrate (His purpose) (59) (Riḍā, 1992).

Shihab’s interpretation, based on verse 56, the unbelievers who should be made fearsome are those who break a peace treaty once it has been made. The verse does not suggest Muslims fear the unbelievers for their disbelief, but instead for their betrayal.

Concerning verse 57, it is stated that those traitors, solely because of their betrayal, should be broken up. This strategy is made so that other people would not follow their evil conduct to a peace treaty. It was only for this reason; indeed, the verse does not suggest Muslims kill them, for the goal is that other people could draw lessons from such warnings.

The traitors, as suggested by the following verse (58), may not be killed until they break the peace treaty, and at that time, Muslims should announce their betrayal. According to Quraish Shihab, killing them without the announcement is another kind of betrayal, even to enemies.

Verse 59, as the end of introductory explanations of reasons for a possible war, says that the betrayal is done by those unbelievers and possibly by others. The end of all these is a warning that they and any people elsewhere who broke the treaty will not be spared from God’s torture.

Shihab’s middle position in interpretation differs from the position of Muhammad Asad, Ṭabarī, and al-Baghawī. Historically, before the war was allowed (the phase of the defensive war) in the 2nd century AH, after the Battle of Badr, especially Q. 8: 56-58, was influenced by two different circumstances. First, repeated violations of the peace treaty by six Jewish tribes, among them Ibn al-Tābūt (al-Suyuti, 2008) which, if encountered on the battlefield, they must be crushed to become an example for others (*fašarrid bihim man khalfahum*). According to Muhammad Asad, this verse implies two points, namely the suggestion of a peace treaty and the ability to fight if openly poorly treated (Riḍā, 1992). Second, if Muslims are concerned about clear and objective evidence that Banī Qurayzah will violate an agreed peace agreement (al-Suyuti, 2008). The

treaty must be returned reasonably (*fanbidh ilayhim 'alā sawā'*). This condition can be understood, according to al-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH), in the sense that before declaring war, it must be declared that they have been betrayed, so both sides are preparing for war, and the offenders soon realize their mistakes (Riḍā, 1992). The allegations were made, according to al-Baghawī (d. 516 AH), so the traitors did not allege that Muslims had unilaterally abrogated the treaty (Riḍā, 1992).

3.1.2 On Non-muslim Succession

Shihab authored a book entitled *Al-Mā'idah 51: Satu Firman, Beragam Penafsiran* (2019), about thirteen years after the so-called 'Ahok's case' or 'the case of Al-Mā'idah: 51' (2006). In his most controversial speech in September 2016 that was delivered in front of local Muslim people in Kembang Island, Kepulauan Seribu, Jakarta, in the campaign for the governor election of 2017, Ahok stated that Indonesian people should not be deceived by Al-Mā'idah 5: 51 in the Qur'an, which prohibits Muslims from electing a non-muslim to be a leader. For this reason, some local Muslim scholars accused him of blasphemy against the Qur'an (Riḍā, 1992).

Shihab regarded the debates on the interpretation, because of political interests and religious thought, seem exaggerated. In his view, every verse is open to diversity of interpretation (Shihab, 2019). Being aware of this diversity, he compiled many interpretations of thirty-nine individual interpreters and one team of interpreters of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia, from the classical and modern eras, with different schools of thought and various states. The steps consist of compilation, analysis of the causes of the difference in interpretation, comparison, conclusion, and drawing some implications of the interpretation of the future relations between Islam and Christianity. Here, from the comparison and conclusion, his stand towards many discussed interpretations will be drawn. His main ideas concerning the interpretation of this verse are as follows:

Firstly, in principle, by accepting the interpretation of the majority of interpreters, the prohibition of intimate (*muwālā*) with non-muslims is common ground that every Muslim must accept anywhere and everywhere (Shihab, 2019). Secondly, though the Jews and Christians are people who are specifically addressed by the verse, it also applies to anyone who has an enmity to Islam and Muslims (Shihab, 2019). Thirdly, since not all Jews and Christians are evil to Muslims, as described in the verses, it is not wise to conclude that the prohibition also must be applied to them. The Qur'an itself (Q. 2: 103) maintains that 'they are not the same', because some of them were hostile, but some others were friendly with Muslims (Shihab, 2019). Fourthly, the prohibited relation with

non-Muslims, as can be understood from Qur'anic vocabulary, '*awliyā' l walāya'*', is based on intimacy or love (*mawadda*) (Shihab, 2019).

3.1.3 His Interpretation of the Verses on Gender Issues

Shihab's interpretation of gender issues, especially concerning the creation of women, is important to discuss to understand his role in counter-balancing many interpretations of the issue made by two opposite interpreters, namely traditional Muslims and Muslim feminists. The following verse, which has been interpreted with different directions by the two groups, reads:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ
 مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ
 عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا ﴿١﴾

'O mankind! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you from oneself (*min nafs wāḥida*), and from it created its mate, and from the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women' (Al-Nisa 4: 1).

The phrase '*min nafs wāḥida*' (literally means 'from oneself') and '*wa khalaqa minhā zawjahā*' (literally means 'and created from it its mate') explain the creation of women. According to Shihab, there are two main opinions concerning the meaning of '*nafs*' in the verse. First, the vast majority of Qur'an interpreters interpret it as 'the Prophet Adam'. This interpretation, as cited by Shihab, has been suggested by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurṭubī, al-Biqā'i, and Abū al-Su'ūd (Shihab, 2019). It implies that the word '*zawjahā*' that is mentioned subsequently could be interpreted as 'mate', namely Adam's wife, Eve (Shihab, 2019). The argument proposed for this interpretation is that the word '*nafs*' indicates someone, not a kind of Adam (humankind) in general (Kathir, 1999) and that, based on the Prophet's ḥadīth, it is said that women are created from man's bent rib.

Second, according to Muḥammad 'Abduh, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, and some contemporary Muslim scholars, both man and woman are created from sperm, not from that bent rib. Among the arguments they advanced is that in another verse (49: 13), as a man, every woman was created from the same origin (Shihab, 2019), and that spreading of humankind, as stated in verse (*wa baththa minhumā rijālan kathīran wa nisā'*), is reasonable only in the sense that 'oneself' (*nafs wāḥida*) is not interpreted with 'the Prophet Adam' since the spreading

occurs from his descendants (Riḍā, 1992). Finally, there is no evidence that woman was created from the bent rib (Riḍā, 1992).

Shihab's position concerning the two interpretations is as follows. First, concerning the intertextual interpretation, he rejected the interpretation of 4: 1 by 49: 13, as suggested by the first group of Muslim scholars. According to Shihab, the latter verse emphasizes the equality among humankind since the different origins in terms of father and mother, and all humankind shares the origin in terms of creation from the sand at the first creation by God. By this way of interpretation, his interpretation is different from that of 'Abduh and the majority of Qur'an interpreters. According to Shihab, the '*nafs wāḥida*' should be understood as 'the Prophet Adam', who is the first origin of all humankind. But, this does not automatically mean that his wife, Eve, was created from Adam himself, but from a 'species' that is the same as that of Adam. This verse, in Shihab's view, explains the breeding of humankind from a couple of Adam and Eve (Riḍā, 1992). It is true that 'Abduh in his exegetical work, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, accepted one of the interpretations of the *nafs wāḥida*, as suggested by a classical authority, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, namely that God created all humankind from the *nafs*, and from it all humankind that have the same species. But, 'Abduh rejected the interpretation of *nafs wāḥida* with 'the Prophet Adam'. Concerning the Qur'anic story on Adam's descendants (*banū Ādam*) at the beginning of the Cow Chapter, 'Abduh emphasizes their existence as those who belong to the same species as Adam (Riḍā, 1992). Thus, Shihab's interpretation differs from that of 'Abduh and the majority of Qur'an interpreters, even though both sides share similar aspects of interpretation. And Shihab's interpretation does seem to be influenced much by al-Biqā'ī (Al-Biqā'ī, nd).

Second, Quraish Shihab criticized the fallacious reasoning of the majority of Muslim scholars because the creation implies inequality between men and women. According to Quraish Shihab, if it is presumed that Eve was created from Adam's bent rib, it does not mean that all women are of lower dignity (Said, 2014).

The phrase *nafs wāḥida*, as stated above, in Shihab's opinion, does not indicate anything other than 'the Prophet Adam' based on an analysis of the correlation between the word and the sentence '*wa batṣṣa minhumā rijālan katsīran wa nisā'*'. Although the *nafs wāḥida* means 'the Prophet Adam', it does not mean that Eve was created from his bent rib, but from the same species (*min jinsihā*). According to al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, as Quraish Shihab cited, no evidence in the verse that proves that Eve was created from Adam. Shihab's interpretation, therefore, has similarities with those of al-Biqā'ī, al-Suyūṭī, and Ibn Kathīr.

Concerning the construct ‘*minhā*’ (literally means: ‘from it’) that refers to *nafs wāḥida*, where its interpretations are mentioned above, it can be implied that Quraish Shihab’s interpretation, as seen in the following table: *0Nafs wāḥida, Minhā, and Qur’an Interpreters* differs from the interpretations of the majority of Muslim scholars, and is similar to the interpretations of al-Ṭabāṭabā`ī, ‘Abduh, Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī, and al-Qaffāl (al-Marāghī, 1946).

No	<i>Nafs wāḥida</i>	<i>Minhā</i>	Qur’an Interpreters
1.	The Prophet Adam	Adam	The majority of interpreters, such as al-Biqā`ī, al-Suyūṭī, and Ibn Kathīr
2.	The Prophet Adam	the same species as the Prophet Adam’s	M. Quraish Shihab and al-Ṭabāṭabā`ī
3.	The same species as the Prophet Adam’s	the same species as the Prophet Adam’s	‘Abduh, Abū Muslim, and al-Qaffāl

Shihab’s stand in the interpretation, therefore, represents the opinion of al-Ṭabāṭabā`ī, a modern Shiite interpreter in *al-Mizān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur`ān*. Even all arguments supported by correlation among verses analysis, namely between the *nafs wāḥida* and the sentence ‘*wa baththa minhumā rijālan kathīran wa nisā*, departing from the analysis of the sūra central theme, and also on his arguments for the interpretation of the phrase ‘*minhā*’ are indebted to this scholar (Nasaruddin, nd). According to Nasaruddin Umar, the opinion that al-Ṭabāṭabā`ī is among the interpreters who said that the word ‘*minhā*’ should be interpreted as ‘a part of Adam’s body’ is false. Al-Ṭabāṭabā`ī concluded that this word indicates ‘a kind or a same of the same kind as that of Adam’ (Nasaruddin, 1999). Thus, Quraish Shihab’s interpretation of these verses shifts from ‘Abduh’s influence on al-Ṭabāṭabā`ī.

3.2 The Role of Malaysian Religious Bodies in Shaping Moderate Islamic Discourse

Various research indicate that Malaysia, as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, has consistently promoted a form of Islam that upholds inclusivity, moderation, and harmony within a pluralistic setting (bin Ahmad Sabri, 2012),

reasons that led the citizens of the country to respect one another despite their diversities. It might be asserted that peaceful coexistence remains the core of Malaysian sustainability. This commitment is reinforced through the state's adoption of the *Malaysia Madani* framework, which envisions an ethical and civil society (MUNIRAH LATEH et al., 2024). At the core of this effort are prominent religious bodies such as the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), the State Mufti Departments, the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), and Yayasan Dakwah Islamiah Malaysia (YADIM) (Hamid, 2018), which play a vital role in shaping, institutionalizing, and disseminating moderate Islamic discourse.

These religious bodies, as Hamid (2018) argues, particularly JAKIM, YADIM, and by extension the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), supported the compliance of Islamic principles within the broad framework of *maqasid sharia* (higher objectives of the *sharia*) in such diverse fields as education, the economy, politics, health, legal affairs, infrastructure, and environment, culture, and society.

3.2.1 *The Institution of Wasatiyyah (Moderation) in Malaysia*

The Malaysian government has long supported the concept of *Islam Wasatiyyah* (moderate Islam) as part of its national agenda. JAKIM, established in 1997, functions as a central institution that coordinates Islamic affairs and promotes a moderate religious framework through national khutbahs (Friday sermons), fatwas, curricula, and publications (Hamayotsu, 2004). Through these instruments, JAKIM advocates for an Islamic vision based on tolerance, social justice, and peaceful coexistence (Hasbullah et al., 2019). Additionally, IKIM contributes by engaging in research and public dialogue that contextualizes Islam within modernity, democracy, and multiculturalism. Its scholars emphasize that moderation is not about compromise but a return to Islamic fundamentals that prioritize *maslahah* (public interest) and *'adl* (justice) (Shamsul Amri, 2016).

It should be noted that Hanapi (2014) asserted that the *Wasatiyyah* (Islamic moderation) concept is one of the concepts found in Islamic epistemology. Based on the definition of *al-wasatiyyah*, which in Arabic means "middle", this concept brings forth a moderate, just and the best approach. It is aimed at balancing extreme and fanatical acts in every aspect of a man's life. In line with the aspirations of the Malaysian Government to promote unity among people of different races and to refrain from social upheavals, the Malaysian government used the concept of *al-wasatiyyah* in an approach to implement the Gagasan 1Malaysia (the 1Malaysia Concept). Furthermore, *al-Wasatiyyah* was

launched by the Malaysian government for the purpose of gaining support from the Malay-Muslims by applying the Islamic concept of moderation in handling the challenge of religious extremism and Islamic resurgence at the national level, as well as championing this issue in the global arena (Othman & Sulaiman, 2014).

It should be noted that Malaysian Muslims accepted *al-Wasatiyyah* of the fact it is sourced from the Glorious Qur'an and Hadith of the Prophet, which disagree with extremist groups that distablise human endeavours from all ramifications (Hanapi, 2014). Maintaining justice and serving as an intermediary to balance any misunderstanding or issues in a given society or community are among its utmost characteristics. It might be concluded that the concept in Malaysia was established to achieve moderate Islam that disregards any act of extreme understanding, which at many times, leads to disunity and creates religious practices beyond the accepted boundary of Islamic teachings.

3.2.2 *The Mandate of Fatwa and Juridical Moderation*

What becomes visible in Malaysia is the fact that Fatwa committees under the National Fatwa Council play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of moderate Islam. These committees issue rulings that reflect a balanced and jurisprudentially sound approach, often avoiding literalist or rigid interpretations. Notably, they have issued fatwas condemning extremist ideologies such as ISIS (Bakar et al., 2019) and declaring such movements as antithetical to Islamic teachings and the values of *Malaysia Madani*. Rosidi (2024) opines that the primary aim of this committee is to reduce inconsistencies, divergences, and conflicts among the *Fatwa* committees, thus contributing to a unified Islamic legislative framework. This signifies that Such *Fatwas* not only counter extremism but also reinforce national unity and respect for law through Islamic jurisprudence.

3.2.3 *Qur'anic Interpretation and the Framing of Fitna*

Malaysian religious authorities are entrusted with various tasks that cut across all aspects of human endeavours. It is noted earlier that the religious bodies comprise various committees; the main goal is to ensure the unity of the *ummah* and to eradicate violence, religious conflict in diverse settings. Therefore, a significant contribution of these institutions lies in their interpretation of Qur'anic verses related to fitna (tribulation or discord). While radical groups often exploit these verses to justify violence or division, Malaysian religious authorities interpret them through a hermeneutic of peace and civilizational ethics. For example,

verses such as (Al-Anfāl 8:73), in which Allah says:

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ ۚ إِلَّا تَفْعَلُوهُ تَكُن فِتْنَةً فِي الْأَرْضِ
 وَفَسَادٌ كَبِيرٌ ﴿٧٣﴾

And those who disbelieve are allies to one another, (and) if you (Muslims of the whole world collectively) do not do so (i.e. become allies, as one united block with one Khalifah - chief Muslim ruler for the whole Muslim world to make victorious Allah's Religion of Islamic Monotheism), there will be Fitnah (wars, battles, polytheism, etc.) and oppression on earth, and a great mischief and corruption (appearance of polytheism), and

verse (Al-Baqarah 2:191), which Allah says:

وَأَقْتُلُوهُمْ حَيْثُ ثَقِفْتُمُوهُمْ وَأَخْرِجُوهُمْ مِنْ حَيْثُ أَخْرَجُوكُمْ ۚ وَالْفِتْنَةُ أَشَدُّ مِنَ الْقَتْلِ ۚ وَلَا تَقَاتِلُوهُمْ عِنْدَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ حَتَّىٰ يَقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِيهِ ۚ فَإِن قَاتَلُوكُمْ فَاقْتُلُوهُمْ ۚ كَذَلِكَ جِزَاءُ الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿١٩١﴾

And kill them wherever you find them and turn them out from where they have turned you out. And Al-Fitnah is worse than killing. And fight not with them at Al-Masjid-al-Haram (the sanctuary at Makkah), unless they (first) fight you there. But if they attack you, then kill them. Such is the compensation of the disbelievers.

The above two verses are contextualized to emphasize patience, due process, and the rejection of vigilantism. The rationale behind this interpretive approach is to reclaim the religious narrative from extremist misuse, providing theological justification for national unity and social cohesion (Saeed, 2005 and Njoku, 2015).

4. A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Based on the results and discussion of this study, this section is primarily intended to articulate the findings. It is important to note that the study examines the counter-discursive strategies of two distinct but complementary actors resisting

radical reinterpretations of the Qur'an: the charismatic exegetical approach of M. Quraish Shihab in Indonesia and the institutional, juridical approach of Malaysian religious authorities. Both aim to promote a *Wasatiyyah* (moderate) understanding of Islam that safeguards social harmony, resists politicized literalism, and counters Islamophobic misrepresentations of the Islamic text (the Glorious Qur'an). However, the mechanisms they employ to achieve these objectives highlight significant differences in authority structures, methods of dissemination, and scope of influence.

Quraish Shihab's strategy is grounded in scholarly charisma and public intellectual authority. Through his *tafsir* works such as *Tafsir al-Mishbah* and thematic writings like *Ayat-ayat Fitna* and his reinterpretation of Qur'an, Surah al-Ma'ida 5:51, which emphasises that the Muslims should not take Jews and the Christians as *auliya* as earlier detailed, especially on his argument on the term 'auliya.' Shihab seeks to contextualise verses that are frequently mobilised by radical interpreters to legitimise exclusionary or confrontational positions. His approach begins with rigorous textual analysis, moves to historical contextualisation, and culminates in ethical re-readings aligned with the *Maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law). In this way, Shihab provides a discursive space in which contested terms such as *fitna*, *jihad*, and *wilayah* are reframed to prioritise justice, coexistence, and civility. His interventions have been particularly significant in moments of public controversy, such as the Ahok blasphemy case and responses to anti-Islam provocations from abroad (Suryana, 2023), (Asry, 2021) where he offers immediate, nuanced hermeneutical correctives that reach a broad audience via books, televised lectures, and public talks (Ikhwan, 2015), (Ikhwan, 2025), and (Nurtawab & Riddell, 2025).

On the divergence side, Malaysian religious authorities, including the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), State Mufti Departments, the National *Fatwa* Council, and institutions such as the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), exercise authority through an institutional and legal framework with the full support of the government (El-Sheikh, 2010). Their counter-discursive efforts are integrated into state policy, particularly within the Malaysia Madani framework, which promotes moderation in official sermons, educational curricula, and policy documents, as discussed earlier in various contexts. Their *Fatwas*, *Khutbahs*, and educational programs aim to pre-empt radical interpretations by embedding moderation into normative and legally binding interpretations of Islam in Malaysia (Khalil & Harun, 2024). This approach benefits from the extensive reach of state-backed religious infrastructure, allowing for consistent messaging across mosques, media, and public institutions.

The comparative analysis in this study reveals notable similarities. Both M. Shihab Quraish and Malaysian religious authorities reject ahistorical literalism and advocate for context-aware, ethically grounded interpretations of the Qur'an. They draw upon *Maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* to justify their readings and seek to bridge intra-Muslim divides while promoting peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims. Furthermore, each utilizes their respective authority base, whether charismatic or institutional, to address both domestic and transnational radical discourses (Noor, 2014).

However, significant differences emerge in terms of authority base, dissemination, and adaptability. Shihab's authority is persuasive rather than coercive; it relies on the voluntary acceptance of his ideas by the public and intellectual community (Ikhwan, 2015). His agility allows for rapid, nuanced responses to emerging controversies but limits enforceability. Malaysian religious authorities, by contrast, wield statutory authority: their pronouncements carry legal and administrative weight (Harding, 2024), ensuring wide dissemination but often at the cost of the deep hermeneutical engagement characteristic of Shihab's work. Moreover, the bureaucratic processes of institutional bodies can slow their responsiveness to fast-evolving socio-political events.

It is clear that the strengths of Shihab's approach lie in its intellectual credibility, depth of textual engagement, and ability to engage both Islamist literalists and Western critics on scholarly grounds, such as Wildter (a Dutch scholar) and others. Yet, this model can be vulnerable to counter-narratives from other influential scholars or groups with opposing agendas. Malaysian authorities' institutional approach excels in mainstreaming moderation through systemic channels, ensuring that moderate interpretations become part of the religious "common sense" in public life. Nevertheless, this method risks conflating religious interpretation with state interests and may be perceived as politicising religion (Means, 1978).

The overall impact of both approaches is best understood as complementary. Shihab's work performs the task of discursive deconstruction, showing that alternative, legitimate readings of the Qur'an exist beyond the radical binary while Malaysian institutions focus on systemic prevention by embedding moderation in the legal-religious framework and public consciousness. This dual strategy addresses both the intellectual and structural dimensions of radical reinterpretation, offering a model that other Muslim-majority contexts might adapt.

Future engagement could explore hybridisation of these approaches: integrating Shihab-style hermeneutics into institutional materials to add nuance to state-backed religious messaging and leveraging institutional platforms to amplify the reach of scholarly works. Such cross-fertilisation could mitigate each

approach's weaknesses while reinforcing their shared objective of safeguarding the Qur'an from manipulative reinterpretations.

The following table sketches a comparative analysis between M. Shihab Quraish and Malaysian religious authorities on matters they played their roles for counterradicalization on interpretation of the Glorious Qur'an and can be seen below:

Points of Comparison	M. Shihab Quraish	Malaysian Religious Authorities
Authority Base	Charismatic, scholarly authority; recognised exegete	Institutional, juridical authority (state-backed)
Primary Medium	Books, <i>tafsir</i> , thematic works, public lectures	<i>Fatwas</i> , <i>Khutbahs</i> , curricula, policy documents
Interpretive Strategy	Contextualisation, <i>Maqāṣid</i> -oriented hermeneutics, ethical reframing	Policy-driven moderation, <i>maqāṣid</i> -based rulings, systemic pre-emption
Rich and Dissemination	Voluntary uptake by readers, media audience, academic circles	Nationwide dissemination via mosque network, education system, media
Strengths	Nuanced hermeneutics, intellectual credibility, agility	Institutional legitimacy, wide reach, policy integration
Weaknesses	No formal enforcement, vulnerable to counter-readings	Risk of politicisation, slower response, less nuanced textual work
Impact Focus	Discursive deconstruction of radical readings	Systemic prevention of radical uptake

The table above compares the foundations of authority established by Indonesian scholar M. Shihab Quraish and Malaysian religious authorities. It highlights that the Indonesian scholar offers his own interpretation of the Qur'an, leading some scholars to label him a modernist for contextualizing its verses within contemporary settings, while others view him as a deviant critic introducing an unconventional approach. In contrast, the Malaysian religious

authorities, as an institution under the Malaysian government, derive their authority from their role in promoting unity, peace, security, peaceful coexistence, and sustainability, which they support through *fatwas*, *khutbahs*, curricula, and policy documents. Both actors are significant, but their strengths and weaknesses, along with their impacts, are outlined in the table. This comparative analysis emphasizes that the fight against radical reinterpretation of the Qur'an cannot depend solely on charismatic scholarship or institutional regulation. Instead, it requires a strategic alignment of both, ensuring that the intellectual rigor of individual scholarship informs the systemic reach of institutional authority.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that contemporary Qur'anic reinterpretation in Indonesia and Malaysia represents a deliberate, multidimensional response to the ideological and socio-political challenges posed by radical Islamic discourse. In Indonesia, the scholarship of M. Quraish Shihab exemplifies an intellectually rigorous, ethically grounded, and contextually sensitive hermeneutic that reframes contentious Qur'anic concepts, such as *fitna*, *awliyā'*, and gender relations, through a lens of moderation (*wasatiyyah*), justice, and coexistence. His approach, grounded in deep textual analysis and moral reasoning, engages both scholarly circles and the wider public, offering a persuasive alternative to literalist and exclusionary readings.

In contrast, Malaysia's state-backed religious authorities, including JAKIM, the National *Fatwa* Council, and State Mufti Departments, institutionalize moderation through systemic dissemination of *Maqāṣid*-based interpretations, policy frameworks, and juridical rulings. By embedding moderate Qur'anic interpretations within official sermons (Khutbah), *fatwas*, and educational curricula, these bodies ensure broad and consistent outreach, while aligning religious discourse with national aspirations for unity, multicultural harmony, and constitutional governance.

The comparative analysis reveals that while Shihab's charismatic, discursive interventions excel in agility, nuance, and intellectual depth, Malaysia's institutional model ensures wide reach, legal authority, and policy integration. Each model carries distinct strengths and limitations; however, their complementary nature underscores the necessity of a dual strategy, one that combines scholarly credibility with institutional capacity to effectively counter radical reinterpretations of the Qur'an. Finally, the Indonesian and Malaysian experiences offer valuable insights for other Muslim-majority societies confronting similar challenges. A strategic synthesis of individual scholarly

hermeneutics and structured institutional dissemination could enhance both the depth and the societal penetration of moderate Islamic discourse, safeguarding the Qur'an's message as a source of justice, civility, and peace in an era of ideological contestation.

6. RECOMMENDATION

This research, therefore, recommends that if its findings are implemented appropriately, it will contribute to the broader discourse on safeguarding the Qur'an's message as a source of justice, peace, and societal resilience in an era of ideological contestation. It also serves as a blueprint for other Muslim-majority nations grappling with similar challenges. Undoubtedly, the roles of M. Shihab Quraish and the Malaysian religious authorities must be appreciated for the significant position they have taken to ensure that radical interpretations are extinguished by whatever means in their countries and the region, as well as in all majority Muslim nations.

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