

Social Conflict Among Religious Groups in the Perspective of Sociology of Religion

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: Religious Conflict; Social Conflict; Sociology of Religion.	Social conflicts between religious communities are a social and cultural issue that still needs to be addressed. They pose a challenging phenomenon within society, creating tension and fractures between individuals and groups with different beliefs. These tensions often pose a threat to the harmony and cohesion among religious communities in Indonesia.
Article history: Received 8 November 2023 Revised 3 December 2023 Accepted 7 December 2023 Published 15 December 2023	Therefore, this study aims to examine the phenomenon of social conflicts among religious communities from the perspective of sociology of religion. Employing a qualitative method with a literature study approach, it explores social conflicts among religious communities from the viewpoint of sociology of religion. The research findings indicated that interfaith dialogue is recognized as an evolving effort to foster associational and social interactions among religious believers. The significant role of the sociology of religion lies in its integral part in the continuous social process, shaping tolerance among religious followers.

Introduction

This study aims to investigate social conflicts among religious communities from the perspective of the sociology of religion. Through this approach, we can identify the drivers of social conflicts among religious communities and formulate solutions that promote tolerance, dialogue, and interfaith harmony. The discussion of social conflicts among religious communities is highly relevant as it plays a crucial role in efforts to build a more inclusive, peaceful, and just society. Furthermore, it also has a significant impact in preventing violence, protecting human rights, promoting social cohesion, and providing information that supports policies and governance that respect diversity and religious freedom (Furseth & Repstad, 2017).

The results of a survey involving 13,600 respondents across 34 provinces showed that the Interreligious Harmony Index (KUB) in Indonesia reached a high category of 73.83 in 2019 (on a scale ranging from 0 to 100). This represents a consecutive increase of 2.93 points from the 2018 KUB, which was previously at 70.90 (Sila, 2019). This substantial increase indicates a notable improvement in interreligious harmony, reflecting positive societal developments across the nation. It underscores an enhanced environment fostering mutual



understanding and cooperation among diverse religious communities. This ascending trend in the index signals a commendable stride towards bolstering unity and tolerance among Indonesia's religiously diverse populace.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, conflicts involving communities with different religious or belief backgrounds continue to be a social reality from the past to the present. This condition also leads to disputes among individuals with diverse beliefs. In Indonesia, examples of interreligious conflicts include conflicts between Muslim and Christian communities in Ambon and Poso, conflicts between followers of Islam and Hinduism in India, and tensions between Muslims in Palestine and Jews in Israel, among several other conflicts. In addition to large-scale conflicts, there are also conflicts on a smaller scale or within more limited scopes.

The role of religion in societal conflicts is a complex paradox. On one hand, religion is often considered a source of morals and values for its followers. However, on the other hand, religion can also be a source of conflict. Social conflicts related to religion or carried out in the name of religion often cannot be justified by the religious doctrines themselves, but are rather caused by ambiguities in interfaith and intercultural relations, as stated by Nur Ahmad (Tharaba, 2016, p. 54). It must be acknowledged that the potential for conflicts among individuals with different religious backgrounds still persists to this day, and it is necessary to continue the search for the best solutions that involve the entire religious community.

Various studies examining interreligious social conflicts have been conducted. Studies indicate that these conflicts are often triggered by differences in beliefs, access to resources, identity politics, and previous conflict history (e.g., Pamungkas, 2015; Raharjo, 2016; Rosyid, 2015). Regarding the impact of these conflicts, they can influence social stability, security, and community cohesion. They can also reinforce social and cultural differences among groups (e.g., Syarif, 2019; Dalimunthe & Mailin, 2023; Indrawan, 2016). Studies highlight the importance of the religious dimension in social conflict, both as a triggering factor and a potential solution. However, the influence of religion on conflicts can vary and be complex (e.g., Setiawan et al., 2020; Ardilla et al., 2023; Arham, 2023). Efforts are made to find solutions through shared values exploration, intergroup dialogue, and the promotion of tolerance and appreciation for diversity (e.g., Rasyid et al., 2023; Huda et al., 2023; Dalmeri, 2015). Previous studies show that interreligious conflicts are triggered not only by specific factors but also have significant implications for society. They emphasize the importance of solutions involving dialogue, tolerance, and appreciation for diversity.

The similarity between this study and previous ones lies in examining the forms, causal factors, and social impacts of conflict. However, it differs by utilizing the perspective of the sociology of religion and emphasizing conflict resolution through interfaith dialogue. It is crucial to note that economic, political, or historical aspects can act as triggers for conflict (Tomalin, 2007). There is no single consensus in comprehending the roots of interreligious social conflicts due to their complexity involving numerous social, cultural, and historical variables (Hannigan, 1991). Hence, this study explores the role of religion in reducing social conflict while acknowledging its potential as a conflict trigger, emphasizing reconciliation



efforts (Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2019). Interreligious social conflicts are a significant concern in various contexts, focusing on triggers, impacts, and resolution efforts to promote peace and tolerance among different religious groups.

Based on the previous discussion, the author is keen to delve deeper into the phenomenon of religion-based conflicts. This study aims to define social conflict and sociology of religion and their interrelation. It explores social interactions, social conflicts, and the analysis of sociology within religious communities. Additionally, it examines the impact of and strategies for handling interreligious social conflicts. Consequently, this study seeks to scrutinize and comprehend the connection between social conflict and sociology of religion, social interaction, conflicts among religious leaders, and strategies to manage interreligious social conflicts. It acknowledges that religion ultimately provides moral guidance amid societal conflicts (Beyers, 2011). Sociology of religion aids in understanding the complex dynamics involved in these conflicts and how communities can progress towards conflict resolution and peace among different religious groups. Sociology does not disregard the role of religion; instead, it acknowledges religion as a crucial institution shaping interpersonal relationships (Cinoğlu, 2010).

Research Method

In writing this paper, the author adopted a writing method based on secondary data sources obtained through a literature review. This study encompasses literature published over the last 10 years, from 2013 to 2023. This research was conducted in digital media by identifying sources from various databases, digital libraries, journals, or books from diverse places relevant to the research topic. This technique involves the extraction of secondary data from various sources in the library through the process of reading, note-taking, and research material analysis, including official documents from relevant institutions, scholarly journals, research reports, theses, dissertations, proceedings, and other scholarly papers (Ariyanto, 2023). The stages of data collection in this literature study include: 1) defining the significance of the research topic to be reviewed; 2) identifying relevant and high-quality references through Google Scholar; 3) selecting a number of references from Google Scholar and categorizing them based on research topic categories; 4) formulating the initial research framework from the articles found; 5) writing a comprehensive literature review; and 6) summarizing and applying the results of the literature review.

The topic of this research pertains to social conflicts among different religious groups from the perspective of the sociology of religion. Therefore, the researcher used keyword searches in both Indonesian and English, such as "social conflict", "religious conflict", "sociology of religion", and "religious conflict and sociology of religion" using Google Scholar. This method allowed the author to gain a profound understanding of the research topic through a careful literature review.

Data analysis involves the following stages: (1) the initial stage involves selecting relevant sources for the study topic; (2) collected data was then filtered to identify the most relevant information supporting the research objectives; (3) relevant information was categorized based on similar themes or topics to facilitate analysis; (4) content analysis of



the gathered information was performed to identify patterns, themes, trends, or perspectives emerging from the used sources; and (5) the analysis results were deeply examined to understand implications, similarities, differences, or contributions to the research topic. This interpretation was used to draw conclusions based on the findings from the literature study. The process of validating data in literature studies involves the following stages: (1) evaluating the reliability of literary data sources such as accredited journals, books by reputable authors, or trusted websites; (2) examining information from literary sources for consistency and accuracy, both in research methodologies and consistency between results and conclusions with other relevant literature; (3) checking for clarity, consistency, and relevance to the research topic; and (4) drawing conclusions.

Results and Discussions Social Conflict and the Sociology of Religion

Social conflict, from a sociological perspective, can be defined as a form of interaction between groups or individuals in society characterized by violent actions or conflicting threats. This conflict arises from differences in interests and is exacerbated by efforts to achieve goals through means involving confrontation and threats to others (Soekanto, 2006, p. 91). On a broader scale, social conflict also encompasses clashes of interests between groups or relationships between individuals in society, affecting the interaction process as a result of differing interests or understandings.

Sociology of religion is a scientific discipline that examines religious phenomena using sociological perspectives, approaches, and frameworks. Within the social context, the sociology of religion delves into the interplay between religion and other social institutions, the changes occurring within religious institutions and their causes, as well as the comparison of religiosity levels across various cultures. On the other hand, at the individual level, the sociology of religion investigates the meaning of religion for its adherents and how individuals interpret their religious beliefs. Additionally, it explores the rationality underlying an individual's decisions to convert to a religion or another religious sect and the impact of the religion or belief they hold on to individual actions.

In this paper, the author aims to investigate and comprehend social phenomena and events, including conflicts, disputes, and even acts of violence in the context of religious life, by referring to the perspectives and theories within the sociology of religion. This study discussed the factors that contribute to conflicts among religious groups, the resulting impacts, as well as the strategies and steps that can be employed to prevent and address the consequences of such conflicts.

Social conflict is closely related to the sociology of religion because religion often becomes a significant dimension in social conflicts. Several aspects elucidate this connection. It links religion to perpetuating social inequality and conflict. Religion is perceived to reinforce the status quo and trigger societal discord (Boundless, 2020). Sociology of religion considers religion's role in social conflicts, acting as both an instigator and mitigator. Religion can drive intergroup conflicts or serve as a source of peace and tolerance. At times, religion is seen as an instrument maintaining social inequality. Wealth and power structures



within religious institutions can be sources of conflict and social disparity (OpenEd CUNY, n.d.). This linkage highlights the vital importance of understanding the sociology of religion in identifying, analyzing, and responding to social conflicts involving religious dimensions.

Social Interaction in Interreligious Social Life

The study of social interaction among religious groups in the sociology of religion emphasizes the dynamics of how individuals from different faiths engage with each other. It focuses on understanding the interactions, relationships, and conflicts that arise within and between religious communities (Alawiyah, 2021). Sociological perspectives on religion aim to comprehend the roles and impacts of these interactions, examining how they shape societal norms, values, and intergroup dynamics. This includes studying the roles of religious leaders, practitioners, and the ways religion influences everyday life and expressions within communities. The examination extends to analyzing conflicts and harmony among religious groups, recognizing the significance of respecting diverse beliefs and human rights within societies (Alawiyah, 2021).

Humans are social beings who require relationships with other human beings or entities. When individuals interact with one another in a society, a phenomenon of social interaction occurs. From a sociological perspective, social interaction is defined as the dynamics within social relationships involving individuals with other individuals, individuals with groups, or even one human group with another human group.

Social interaction plays a key role in social life. Without social interaction, communal living becomes challenging to achieve, as cooperation among individuals or groups of individuals is fundamentally necessary to attain common goals. This includes talking, working together, competing, or even dealing with disputes and other forms of interaction. This is confirmed by the results of a survey conducted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which showed that the Interfaith Harmony Index reached a score of 75.40, higher than indicators of tolerance and equality (Sila, 2019). These results indicate that social interaction, particularly in the form of cooperation, has the potential to strengthen solidarity and integration within religious communities.

However, on the other hand, there is still a significant occurrence of dissociative interactions in the form of social conflicts. Social conflicts between individuals of different faiths are clear examples of dissociative interactions that involve disagreements and disputes among them. As we are aware, some interfaith conflicts include conflicts in Poso, Tolikara, and Ambon (between Islam and Christianity), conflicts in Aceh and Situbondo (Islam and Christianity), as well as conflicts in South Lampung (Buddhism and Islam), and several other conflicts.

To understand the dynamics of social interactions in religious communities, it is important to recognize the role of positive social interactions in strengthening integration and unity within society while identifying and addressing the factors that lead to dissociative interactions and social conflicts. According to social identity theory, religious identity influences conflict and interaction among religious groups (Abbas, 2015). Social conflict among religious groups is a multifaceted phenomenon often involving interfaith



tensions within society. From the perspective of the sociology of religion, this conflict revolves around differences in beliefs, values, and religious identities that can lead to social discord. Within this perspective, conflicts between religious groups are understood as outcomes of social tensions encompassing differences in religious ideologies, social structures, and power within communities.

There is a view that religion can reinforce social disparities, perpetuate the status quo, and affirm social inequalities. However, religion can also act as a catalyst for positive social change or as a trigger for social issues, contingent upon its understanding and application within the societal context (Beckford, 1990). Religious conflicts are often perceived as more brutal and regressive; however, studies indicate this is not an absolute truth. Various social theories, like conflict theory, consider religion as a factor that can trigger social conflicts. This conflict, within the realm of the sociology of religion, stems from diverse social, structural, and ideological factors, necessitating a profound understanding to prevent and address its impacts on society.

Interreligious conflicts, seen through the lens of sociology of religion, reveal intricate connections between social dynamics and religious affiliations. A study delves into the complex relationship between religion and conflict, offering a comprehensive view of their association and impact (Regus, 2022). Interpretations of religious truths often act as triggers for social conflict. This dynamic arises from diverse interpretations of sacred beliefs among religious followers, contributing to tensions (Amri et al., 2020). Research examines religion as a potential trigger for conflict and highlights the importance of understanding how religious beliefs can contribute to conflict initiation (Syarif, 2019). Studies explore how various dimensions of religiosity influence support for interreligious protests, providing insights into varied responses within religiously diverse societies (Setiawan et al., 2020). In pluralistic societies, religion plays a dual role-either promoting violence or fostering peace (Anthony et al., 2015).

Social Conflict Among Religious Followers

This section highlights the role of religious understanding and the religious paradigm in shaping social interactions and conflicts among religious followers. It underscores the importance of promoting deeper understanding, tolerance, and pluralism as steps to address conflicts within religious communities. In the conflict functionalist perspective, conflicts within religion serve to uphold social structures and balance group interests (Febriyandi YS, 2019; Rogers & Konieczny, 2018; Normuslim, 2020).

Religion can be imagined as a double-edged sword: the first edge being the normative dimension, which is eternal, and the second edge is the historical dimension, where universal values derived from religion enter the cultural domain (Amin, 2015). When the universal values of religion permeate the dimension of history and culture, religion becomes intertwined with practical issues in everyday life. Religion and societal issues cannot be separated, as religion plays a significant role in society (Rachmat, 2012, p. 45). Empirically, religion is linked to various social issues. At this level, religion, culture, and society influence each other based on human interests, including in the fields of politics, economics,



social aspects, and more. This is where the universal values of religion can be distorted. Religion can be used to legitimize political and economic goals, especially when religion has already formed social and political identities (Suharto, et al., 2021).

In the field of religious sociology, there are several factors that can lead to social conflicts among religious followers, including religious understanding, differences in cultural levels among adherents, issues between majority and minority religious followers, as well as differences in ethnicity or race among religious communities (Hendropuspito, 1989). Specifically, there are several factors that can trigger social conflicts in the religious context, such as claims of truth, the blurring of perceptions between religious territories and ethnicities, the doctrine of jihad, a lack of tolerance in religious practices, and a lack of understanding of pluralistic principles. A similar opinion is expressed by Zaenuddin (Tharaba, 2016), who identifies four factors causing social conflicts in the religious context: exclusivism, claims of truth, fanaticism, and the politicization of religion.

In conflicts among followers of different religions, religious understanding often becomes the main factor triggering disputes. Typically, each party involved in such conflicts has their own understanding of their religious teachings, and they tend to compare it with the religious teachings of the opposing party. According to research conducted by the Center for Religious Life Research and Development, a research institution under the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, a person's level of religious understanding is related to the level of exclusivism in their religious beliefs. Concretely, the higher a person's religious understanding, the less exclusivism is likely to appear in their religious beliefs. Conversely, the lower a person's religious understanding, the more likely exclusivism will appear in their religious views (Khalikin & Zirwansyah, 2013). Parties involved in conflicts tend to place their own religion in the highest regard and use it as the primary reference. In this context, the highest judgment is always given to the religion they adhere to, which becomes the benchmark for their group.

In terms of attitudes, one can observe how a particular group views another group, including the presence of biases and stereotypes that a specific group may hold against another group. In interreligious relationships, for example, through the attitude dimension, we can observe how Muslims view Christians and vice versa, or how Christians view Muslims. Stereotypes that often develop in society regarding the relationship between Muslim and Christian believers include the image that Christians are trying to Christianize Muslims, while Muslims are trying to Islamize Christians. Moreover, there is a stereotype that Muslims and Christians are seen as two groups that cannot peacefully coexist.

A person's religious understanding is greatly influenced by the paradigm used in interpreting their religious teachings. An exclusive religious paradigm tends to result in dissociative social interactions among individuals from different religions. Conversely, an inclusive and pluralistic religious paradigm holds great promise for generating associative social interactions among followers of different religions. Social conflict among religious followers has garnered attention in the sociology of religion, revealing a paradox concerning the role of religion in society. While religion often serves as a moral compass, there is a contradiction where it can also be a source of conflict (Syamsuddin, 2020; Bm, 2014). This



research highlights the factors causing conflict, prevention efforts, and the role of religion in the dynamics of interfaith social conflicts (Sumanto, 2020; Kafid, 2015). On one hand, religion serves as a unifying tool, yet on the other, narrow religious interpretations can trigger conflicts (Kafid, 2015). In this context, religion plays a complex role in shaping identities and influencing conflict dynamics within society (Bm, 2014; Sumanto, 2020).

The Impact of Social Conflict Among Religious Communities

Conflicts can trigger the emergence of hate speech and discrimination among religious communities, exacerbating societal divisions (Hisyam, 2006). These conflicts can induce political and economic instability, hindering community development and welfare, damaging social structures, and disrupting the previously established harmony among religious groups (Bm, 2014). According to Dhoriri (2007), the positive impacts of conflicts include: a) every society always strives to carry out activities in its life towards goodness, especially in religious aspects; b) enhancing solidarity among group members or "in-group solidarity"; c) the emergence of strong individuals who can withstand various conflict situations; d) helping to revive old norms and create new norms; e) the emergence of new compromises when conflicting parties are in a balanced power position; f) conflicts can create harmonious integration and strengthen the identities of the conflicting parties; g) conflicts can open up perspectives and create better groups; h) conflicts can clarify various aspects of life that have not been resolved; i) the presence of conflict leads to the readjustment of norms and values in society.

Interreligious social conflicts significantly impact the field of sociology of religion. Findings suggest that religion often is not the direct cause but is utilized as a tool to mobilize both human and non-human resources within intergroup conflicts (Seul, 1999; Lindgren, 2018). Studies also reveal that the direct effects of religion in intergroup conflicts are not always evident due to the complexity of factors such as identity, beliefs, and the use of religion as a tool for group identity (Neuberg et al., 2014). The perspective of sociology of religion underscores the importance of considering religion as a cultural source influencing intergroup conflicts (Saroglou, 2016). In this understanding, religion plays a complex role in the dynamics of social conflict influenced by doctrinal content and cultural contexts (Hall, 2013). Negative impacts of conflicts (Yamane, 2016) include: a) the rupture of relationships between individuals or groups with other individuals or groups; b) changes in a person's personality, such as constantly harboring suspicions and hatred; c) group competition and dominance in daily activities; d) the outbreak of riots and clashes; e) the emergence of fear and insecurity; f) triggering armed conflicts leading to the political destruction of a country.

In both historical and modern contexts, interreligious conflicts often involve disputes related to beliefs, values, or specific territories (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Conflict drivers are frequently linked to inequality, intolerance, power struggles, and differences in beliefs (Krause et al., 2019). Interreligious conflicts can result in social damage, community fragmentation, and a decline in the overall quality of life (Abidin, 2020).



Efforts and Strategies to Address Social Conflict Among Religious Communities

This section emphasizes the importance of dialogue, education, maintaining harmony, and cooperation among various parties in society to prevent and address religious conflicts while promoting peace and tolerance in diverse religious communities. The initiative of interfaith dialogue has become a primary approach to strengthen understanding and tolerance among religious communities (Zainuddin, 2013). Efforts to prevent conflicts are carried out by enhancing interfaith dialogues, educational activities, and raising awareness about the importance of tolerance (Abdillah, 2015).

Conflict prevention can be achieved through several efforts, such as maintaining peaceful conditions in society and developing peaceful dispute resolution systems. When social conflicts have already occurred, individuals or groups need to respond by analyzing the situation and evaluating relevant effectiveness principles. Resolution of interreligious conflicts can be achieved through dialogues with other religious communities, prioritizing humanistic principles, mutual openness, mutual respect, and willingness to listen to different perspectives. Such an attitude is crucial in finding common ground among different religions, considering that each religion has different, unique, and complex characteristics. Although interreligious dialogue exists among scholars, it needs to be expanded and developed further, so it covers all segments of society and is not limited to the educated elite.

The field of religious sociology has great potential in advancing interfaith dialogue. From a sociological perspective, dialogue is part of a social process that is associative and can serve as a solution to address social conflicts among religious communities, which, in turn, can lead social interactions towards cooperation. The functional relationship between religion and society makes religion a catalyst in preventing social disintegration in society. Religion also functions as a spiritual force that can guide and help address social issues that arise in society, overcome social frustration, oppression, and poverty (Nur Ahmad (Tharaba, 2016, p. 53). Dadang Kahmad, as cited in Tharaba (2016, p. 88), provides steps to minimize religious conflicts: 1) highlight the similarities in religions and avoid emphasizing differences; 2) engage in social activities involving adherents of different religions; 3) change the orientation of religious education from a sectoral (fighiyah) aspect to a universal (rabbaniyah) aspect; 4) improve individual development that leads to the formation of individuals with noble character and righteous morals; and 5) avoid an egotistical attitude in religion, where one claims to be the most right.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has conducted a survey to measure the Index of Harmony Among Religious Communities. Taking into account various factors, here are some policy recommendations and implications: 1) maximize efforts to maintain harmony and anticipate conflicts starting from the family level, educational institutions, and society; 2) provide training on how to refrain from unlawful actions and offer legal advocacy on how to handle potential conflicts that might escalate into actual conflicts; 3) support the efforts made by the government and regional governments in maintaining harmony and anticipating conflicts; 4) as a diverse nation, there is no denying that there are many integration and conflict potentials in Indonesian society. Some potential



conflicts/disorderliness have manifested in certain regions, but national harmony is generally good; 5) there are some religious factors that can affect harmony, but non-religious factors have a greater impact (such as economic disparities and political dynamics); 6) the government has been and continues to make efforts to handle religious conflicts, develop a culture of peace and tolerance, and strengthen the regulatory framework for harmony; and 7) the public (including NGOs, media, and students) needs to strengthen synergy in maintaining societal harmony and mutual understanding-according to their respective capacities and fields (Sila, 2019).

Sociological studies of religious intergroup conflicts aim to identify resolution strategies. This approach involves several strategies: a) understanding conflicts based on perceived threats and beliefs, promoting positive intergroup contact (Setiawan et al., 2021); and b) fostering deeper understanding of differences and similarities between religions to minimize inequality (Abu-Nimer, 2001). Within the sociological perspective, conflict is viewed as a normal part of social dynamics. Functional solutions minimizing negative impacts are sought (Kerebungu & Fathimah, 2023). This perspective delves into religious conflict concepts, identifies sources, and analyzes implications (Kerebungu & Fathimah, 2023). Sociological studies of religion analyze various conflict contexts to understand triggers and solutions (Syarif, 2019). The sociological perspective emphasizes positive intergroup interactions, in-depth understanding of differences, and integrated conflict resolution strategies aligned with theoretical and practical comprehension.

Conclusions

Social conflicts can be caused by religious factors, including the ambiguity in the relationship between religion and culture, the politicization of religion, truth claims, exclusive attitudes, and religious fanaticism. To prevent conflicts, various ways and efforts can be undertaken, such as maintaining peaceful conditions in society, developing peaceful dispute resolution systems, reducing the potential for conflicts, and establishing early warning systems. In addition, inclusive, pluralistic, and tolerant attitudes, as well as democracy, are keys to addressing conflicts, thereby promoting harmony and peace in religious, national, state, and community life.

Interfaith dialogue is recognized as one of the efforts that need to be continually developed to build associational social interactions among religious believers. The sociology of religion plays a crucial role in supporting this dialogue, as it falls within the sociological realm and is part of the associational social process that can serve as a solution to address social conflicts among religious groups. Furthermore, the importance of a tolerant attitude in practicing one's religion is emphasized, as every religion teaches tolerance and compassion. Communities, including NGOs, media, and students, need to collaborate to maintain social harmony and unity within their respective capacities and fields. On the other hand, the government must continue its efforts to address religious conflicts, promote a culture of peace and tolerance, and strengthen the regulatory framework to preserve harmony.



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