

Reconstructing Religious Policy Governance for Social Cohesion in Plural Societies

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Abstract

Religious diversity can enrich plural societies, yet government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion remain widespread, and public institutions may deepen exclusion when they privilege dominant traditions or implement religious policies inconsistently. Existing scholarship examines state–religion regimes, local consultation, rights protection, and interreligious dialogue largely in isolation, so their interaction across the policy process remains underexplored. This study therefore reconstructs religious policy governance as an integrated institutional process that supports social cohesion while safeguarding equal citizenship and freedom of religion or belief. A qualitative integrative review was conducted on 39 peer-reviewed studies identified in Scopus (2016–2026) and analysed through combined deductive–inductive thematic synthesis, with four provisional domains used as sensitizing concepts. The synthesis retained four interconnected dimensions—inclusive institutional governance, deliberative and participatory governance, rights-based recognition and accommodation, and dialogue-based conflict transformation—and generated two insights not specified in advance. First, the dimensions are conditionally complementary: coordination without transparent representation reproduces the privileged access of established religious organizations, and participation without accountability remains consultative rather than influential. Second, public accountability operates as the linking mechanism that converts consultation and dialogue into institutional responses across the policy cycle. Unlike frameworks that classify national state–religion regimes or conceptualize the governing role of cities, the proposed framework connects these dimensions across policy stages and levels of government. Practically, it offers policymakers a diagnostic tool for reviewing representation criteria, coordination arrangements, accommodation procedures, and grievance mechanisms. Its conceptual relationships require empirical validation, particularly beyond the predominantly European evidence base.

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INTRODUCTION

Research Background

Religious diversity is an enduring feature of plural societies, visible across public institutions, schools, workplaces, and other shared spaces ([Dikici, 2021](#); [Rouméas, 2020](#)). It can foster intergroup contact, trust, and cooperation ([Ramos et al., 2019](#)), but it can also generate disputes over recognition, religious symbols, places of worship, education, public funding, and the accommodation of religious practices ([Beaman et al., 2018](#); [Lefebvre, 2020](#); [Perez, 2020](#)).

The urgency of this problem is empirically visible. In 2022, 59 of 198 countries and territories had high or very high government restrictions on religion, and 45 experienced high or very high religion-related social hostilities; among the most populous countries, Indonesia recorded very high government restrictions, and India and Pakistan very high social hostilities ([Pew Research Center, 2024](#)). In Indonesia, the interreligious harmony forums (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*, FKUB) that recommend permits for houses of worship draw their membership largely from leaders of officially recognized religions, and church-permit disputes often remain unresolved ([Jati et al., 2024](#)). In Pakistan, blasphemy legislation has exposed Ahmadi and Christian minorities to legal vulnerability and communal violence ([Julius, 2016](#)), while in Malaysia the legal construction of religion has made conversion a recurrent rights conflict ([Moustafa, 2018](#)). Religious policy is therefore a recurring source of public conflict whose course depends on institutional design.

The consequences of diversity thus depend on how institutions recognize and respond to it. Social cohesion is understood here as a property of horizontal relations among groups and vertical relations between citizens and institutions, expressed in trust, belonging, and willingness to participate and cooperate ([Chan et al., 2006](#)), and comprising social relations, identification with the community, and orientation toward the common good ([Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017](#)). Cohesion becomes exclusionary when it protects established privileges or frames minority practices as threats to dominant values ([Beaman, 2016](#); [Bouma, 2016](#); [Ezzy et al., 2020](#)). It therefore refers not to the absence of disagreement or to assimilation, but to arrangements that allow citizens to keep distinct religious and nonreligious identities while participating in shared institutions as equals ([Jackson, 2016](#); [Lapis, 2025](#)).

Governing religious diversity requires protecting freedom of religion or belief alongside equality, public safety, gender equality, and child protection ([Ghanea, 2022](#); [Jacobs & Arora, 2018](#)), among communities that differ in organization and relationship with the state ([Kolb, 2020](#); [Sealy et al., 2022](#)). No single model of state–religion relations applies universally

([Modood & Sealy, 2022](#)), and constitutional guarantees acquire practical meaning through local authorities, courts, religious organizations, and interreligious bodies ([Griera & Nagel, 2018](#); [Ozzano, 2026](#)), where established organizations often retain greater access than minority groups ([Galal et al., 2018](#); [Prideaux & Dawson, 2018](#)).

These issues are usually examined separately. The comparative framework of [Modood and Sealy \(2022\)](#) classifies national state–religion regimes but says little about how participation, accommodation, and dialogue are coordinated during implementation. [Martínez-Ariño \(2018\)](#) conceptualizes cities as governance actors, but within European settings and without systematically linking local arrangements to rights protection and accountability. Reviews of interreligious dialogue treat its links with policy processes as secondary ([Driessen, 2025](#)), while Asian studies show that consultative forums can exist without giving affected groups real influence or recourse ([Haryanto et al., 2025](#); [Jati et al., 2024](#)). What remains underdeveloped is an integrated explanation of how coordination, participation, rights-based accommodation, accountability, and dialogue operate together across the policy process.

This study addresses that gap. Rather than adding another typology of regimes, it specifies how four dimensions—inclusive institutional governance, deliberative and participatory governance, rights-based recognition and accommodation, and dialogue-based conflict transformation—condition one another, positions public accountability as the mechanism linking them, and organizes these relationships along the policy cycle and across levels of government.

The policy cycle is used as a heuristic device: despite criticism of its implied linearity ([Howlett et al., 2020](#)), it is adapted here into problem identification, formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation only to locate where each dimension operates. Because religious policy is delivered by networks of agencies, local governments, religious organizations, and civil society, the study also addresses collaborative governance questions of power imbalance, institutional design, and shared accountability ([Ansell & Gash, 2008](#); [Emerson et al., 2012](#); [Lee & Ospina, 2022](#)).

Problem Identification

Religious policy governance faces three interconnected problems. First, state–religion arrangements do not always accommodate the different religious and nonreligious sources of legitimacy held by citizens ([Modood & Sealy, 2022](#); [Stoeckl, 2017](#)), and minorities, nonreligious citizens, women, young people, and converts may receive formal recognition while remaining excluded from decisions ([Beaman et al., 2018](#); [Galal et al., 2018](#); [Ghanea, 2022](#); [Moustafa, 2018](#)), as FKUB membership in Indonesia illustrates ([Jati et al., 2024](#)). Second, national governments, local authorities, courts, and religious organizations often act without sufficient coordination, producing gaps between legal guarantees and implementation ([Griera & Nagel, 2018](#); [Körs & Nagel, 2018](#); [Martínez-Ariño, 2018](#)). Third, policies may emphasize tolerance and dialogue while lacking monitoring, public justification, and remedies ([Haryanto et al., 2025](#); [Lee & Ospina, 2022](#); [Suntay, 2025](#)), so that

dialogue promotes symbolic harmony without addressing unequal power ([Driessen, 2025](#); [Prideaux & Dawson, 2018](#)).

Research Questions

1. What institutional principles and arrangements does the reviewed literature identify for adapting religious policy governance to different state–religion regimes and levels of government while upholding equal citizenship and freedom of religion or belief?
2. Which mechanisms of inclusive participation, multilevel coordination, public accountability, and rights-based accommodation does the literature identify for protecting minority communities and limiting the domination of religious policy by established actors, and how are these mechanisms related?
3. Under what conditions, according to the literature, can interreligious dialogue and conflict-transformation mechanisms be linked to the stages of the religious policy cycle to manage social tensions and support social cohesion?

Research Objectives and Significance

This study aims to reconstruct religious policy governance as an integrated, multilevel, and rights-oriented framework for strengthening social cohesion. It examines how inclusive participation, multilevel coordination, accountability, and rights-based accommodation can be integrated into the policy process, how minority communities can be protected from policy domination by established actors, and how dialogue and mediation can be incorporated throughout the policy cycle.

Theoretically, the study explains how these elements operate collectively rather than as separate interventions. Practically, it offers a heuristic, diagnostic basis for reviewing existing arrangements, adaptable to different legal regimes, majority–minority configurations, and levels of government, rather than a single prescribed design.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on religious diversity governance has moved beyond church–state relations toward the institutional arrangements through which religious and nonreligious differences are recognized, represented, and accommodated. These arrangements reflect constitutional traditions, administrative structures, and interpretations of secularism ([Griera & Nagel, 2018](#); [Modood & Sealy, 2022](#)), and formally neutral arrangements can produce unequal outcomes when established organizations retain privileged access ([Galal et al., 2018](#); [Prideaux & Dawson, 2018](#)). Municipal consultation forums, interfaith councils, and partnerships ([Körs & Nagel, 2018](#)) show that the field is institutionally contingent and multilevel.

This literature is predominantly European, yet similar questions arise elsewhere. [Sealy et al. \(2022\)](#) describe South and Southeast Asia as regions of deep diversity in which state recognition, legal pluralism, and majoritarian pressures coexist under strain. In Indonesia, the FKUB established in 2006 decentralized interreligious governance, but its elite, recognized-religion-based membership and ceremonial practice have limited its capacity to resolve church-permit disputes ([Jati et al., 2024](#)), and village deliberation coexists with weak accountability ([Haryanto et al., 2025](#)). The problems examined here are therefore not confined to Europe, although the analytical corpus remains Europe-centred.

Participation, recognition, and rights protection are related but distinct. Recognition can strengthen minorities' standing without giving them influence ([Chin & Levey, 2023](#)), and representation depends on rules about who counts as a legitimate representative ([Galal et al., 2018](#); [Prideaux & Dawson, 2018](#)). Identical rules applied to unequal groups may preserve disadvantage, whereas accommodation without clear criteria may produce inconsistent treatment, as research on neutrality in education shows ([Dupont, 2022](#); [Jackson, 2016](#)); contested decisions therefore require transparent procedures of review and justification ([Beaman, 2016](#)).

Research on interreligious dialogue shows that it gains institutional relevance when it addresses concrete public concerns and is connected to public authorities ([Di Placido & Palmisano, 2025](#); [Driessen, 2025](#); [Griera et al., 2018](#); [Ozzano, 2026](#)), and that cooperation evolves through continuing negotiation rather than single initiatives ([Emmerich, 2022](#)). Its effectiveness depends on participant selection, agenda-setting, and institutional responsiveness, but the literature explains less systematically how dialogue interacts with participation, rights protection, and accountability.

The central limitation is therefore fragmentation rather than an absence of research: comparative studies say little about implementation ([Modood & Sealy, 2022](#)), local governance research remains tied to European cities ([Körs & Nagel, 2018](#); [Ozzano, 2026](#)), and dialogue research rarely connects dialogue with rights and accountability ([Driessen, 2025](#)). Australian research adds that cohesion defined as conformity can marginalize minorities and should be treated as an outcome of inclusive design ([Ezzy et al., 2020](#)). Table 1 shows that each strand addresses one or two components, but none connects all five across the policy stages.

Table 1. Key prior studies and their limitations relevant to this study

Study	Context	Focus	Main Finding	Limitation Relevant to This Study
Modood & Sealy (2022)	Global comparative	Framework for comparing governance of religious diversity	Governance models vary with state–religion histories; no single model is universally applicable	Focus on national regimes; limited attention to implementation, participation, and accountability across policy stages
Martínez-Ariño (2018)	European cities	Role of cities in governing religious diversity	Cities are active actors shaping regulation and accommodation	Urban European focus; weak link to rights protection and dialogue

Study	Context	Focus	Main Finding	Limitation Relevant to This Study
Körs & Nagel (2018)	Germany	Local state–interfaith governance	Interfaith councils and partnerships improve communication with authorities	Representation and accountability of forums not systematically examined
Galal et al. (2018) ; Prideaux & Dawson (2018)	Scandinavia; United Kingdom	Interfaith forums and state–majority church relations	Forums widen access but can reproduce hierarchies favouring established churches	Context-specific; forums not connected with rights-based remedies
Chin & Levey (2023)	Multicultural democracies	Symbolic recognition	Recognition can affirm belonging without conferring influence or remedies	Institutional mechanisms linking recognition to policy not specified
Driessen (2025)	Global review	Interreligious dialogue, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding	Sustained dialogue supports trust and conflict prevention	Links between dialogue and formal policy processes remain secondary
Ozzano (2026) ; Di Placido & Palmisano (2025)	Europe; Turin, Italy	Dialogue and local governance	Dialogue matters more when connected to public authorities	European local cases; accountability mechanisms underdeveloped
Sealy et al. (2022)	South and Southeast Asia	Comparative governance of deep diversity	Recognition and legal pluralism coexist with majoritarian strain	Regional overview; limited analysis of policy-cycle mechanisms
Haryanto et al. (2025)	Indonesia (villages)	Deliberative democracy	Participation can exist without accountability	Not specific to religious policy
Jati et al. (2024)*	Indonesia	FKUB and grassroots interfaith dialogue	Elite, recognized-religion-based forums are often ceremonial and leave minorities disadvantaged	Single-country focus

* Contextual study added during revision; not part of the coded corpus of 39 studies.

Source: Authors' synthesis of the reviewed literature.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Framework

The main theoretical lens is multilevel governance. [Hooghe and Marks \(2003\)](#) distinguish Type I governance, with authority dispersed across nested general-purpose jurisdictions, from Type II governance, with task-specific and overlapping bodies; religious policy displays both, as ministries coexist with municipal authorities while interfaith councils and harmony committees act as task-specific bodies, which explains dispersed responsibility and coordination problems. Collaborative governance explains how public and nonstate actors interact in these arrangements ([Ansell & Gash, 2008](#); [Emerson et al., 2012](#)). Together, multilevel governance defines where authority lies, collaborative governance how actors work together, deliberative and rights-based perspectives what is legitimate and fair, and conflict transformation how relationships are repaired.

Outcomes depend on how institutional actors interact in local settings ([Martínez-Ariño, 2018, 2019](#)), and cooperation can privilege established religious organizations ([Körs, 2019](#)). Following Lee and Ospina's process-based approach ([Lee & Ospina, 2022](#)), public accountability is defined as the obligation of public institutions and their partners to explain and justify decisions to affected communities, to have their conduct monitored, and to remedy identified failures.

Deliberative governance accommodates diverse religious and moral claims without demanding identical public reasoning and addresses barriers to the participation of underrepresented groups ([Gherghina et al., 2021](#); [Stoeckl, 2017](#)). Rights-based perspectives require that freedom of religion or belief and equal citizenship extend to minorities and nonreligious citizens, whose realization is shaped by institutional practice and power ([Breskaya et al., 2022](#); [Fox, 2021](#); [Koppelman, 2018](#)).

Interreligious engagement adds a relational dimension ([Bakrač et al., 2023](#)) grounded in conflict transformation theory, which emphasizes long-term change in relationships and the role of middle-range actors linking communities and leaders, a position interreligious bodies can occupy ([Lederach, 1997](#)); [Abu-Nimer \(2001\)](#) adds that peacebuilding must engage religious identities and values, and mediation offers alternatives to litigation ([Rouméas, 2020](#)). Social cohesion is accordingly the capacity of citizens and institutions to sustain trust and constructive relationships while religious and nonreligious identities remain visible ([Bouma, 2016](#); [Ezzy et al., 2020](#)).

Conceptual Framework

From these perspectives, the study derives four provisional domains, used as sensitizing concepts rather than predetermined findings: inclusive institutional governance, concerning coordination among authorities, religious organizations, civil society, and affected communities ([Körs, 2019](#); [Martínez-Ariño, 2018](#)); deliberative and participatory governance, concerning accessible decision-making and the representation of minorities, women, youth, and nonreligious citizens ([Gherghina et al., 2021](#)); rights-based recognition and accommodation, concerning equal citizenship and freedom of religion or belief ([Breskaya et al., 2022](#); [Fox, 2021](#)); and dialogue-based conflict transformation, concerning reconciliation and trust-building ([Bakrač et al., 2023](#)).

Public accountability is specified a priori as a cross-cutting lens across the policy cycle ([Lee & Ospina, 2022](#)), and the synthesis examined whether the evidence supported this role. Without it, consultation may provide representation without influence ([Haryanto et al., 2025](#)), particularly where government discrimination disadvantages minorities ([Suntay, 2025](#)). The domains are not presumed to form a fixed model; their relationships are reconstructed through the synthesis (Figure 1).

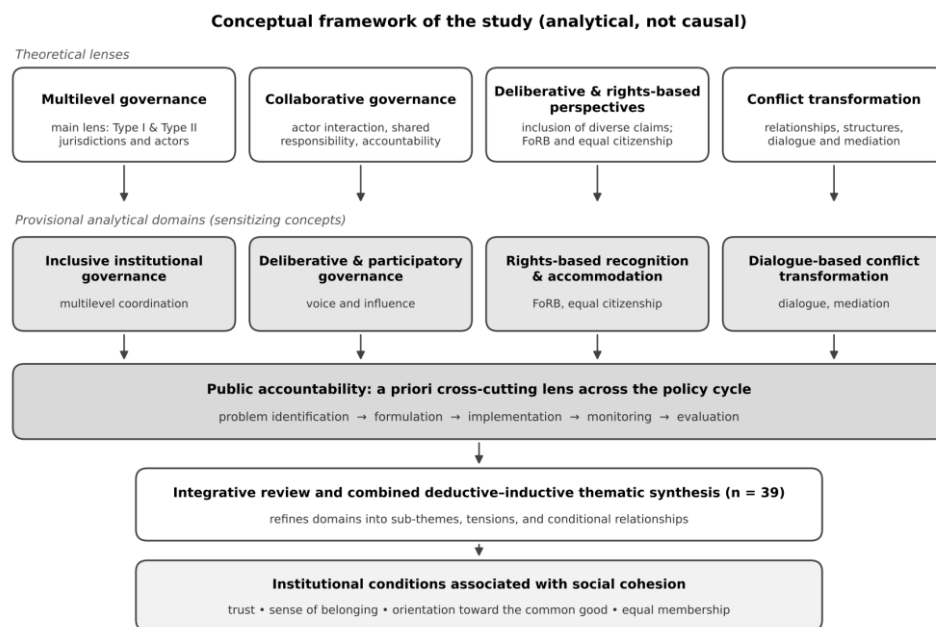


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Note: Public accountability was specified a priori as a cross-cutting lens; the synthesis examined whether the evidence supported this role. Arrows indicate analytical relationships, not causal effects.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative integrative review and comparative conceptual synthesis, an approach suited to integrating theoretical arguments, empirical findings, and institutional perspectives rather than estimating causal effects ([Snyder, 2019](#); [Torraco, 2005](#)). It followed the five stages of [Whittemore and Knafl \(2005\)](#): problem identification, literature search, data evaluation (Table 2), data analysis (Table 3), and presentation. Comparative conceptual synthesis denotes the systematic comparison of concepts and mechanisms reported in different contexts to integrate them into a higher-order framework ([Torraco, 2005](#)). Countries were not treated as cases; the region, state–religion arrangement, and majority–minority configuration of each study (Appendix 1) served as contextual attributes.

The search was conducted in Scopus, with bibliographic details verified through DOI records, and covered journal articles published between 2016 and 2026. It was run on [day Month 2026] in the TITLE-ABS-KEY field using the string below, with filters for publication years 2016–2026, document type [article/review – authors to confirm], language [English/other – authors to confirm], and subject area [to be specified]; it returned [n] records (Figure 2). Reliance on one database is acknowledged as a limitation. Relevance assessment yielded 39 studies (Appendix 1); two ([Jacobs & Arora, 2018](#); [Ramos et al., 2019](#)) relate only indirectly to religious policy and were treated as contextual studies, and references added for theoretical and contextual discussion (e.g., [Hooghe & Marks, 2003](#); [Jati et al., 2024](#)) were not coded.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria are shown in Table 2. Direct relevance meant an argument or finding on at least one governance component in relation to religious diversity, and

credibility meant publication in a peer-reviewed journal with verifiable bibliographic information and a DOI. No formal quality appraisal tool was applied, because no single instrument suits a corpus combining conceptual, legal, qualitative, and quantitative studies.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Database and period	Indexed in Scopus; published 2016–2026	Published outside this period or not retrievable in Scopus
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, including empirical, review, and conceptual articles; editorial introductions only when they advance a substantive conceptual argument	Books, book chapters, conference papers, and grey literature
Topic	Governance of religious diversity, state–religion relations, freedom of religion or belief, minority recognition and accommodation, interreligious dialogue, participation, accountability, or social cohesion	Religion treated only as an individual-level variable without institutional or policy relevance
Analytical relevance	Arguments, findings, or descriptions of governance practices relevant to at least one research question	No direct analytical relevance to the research questions
Verifiability	Complete bibliographic information and a verifiable DOI	Unverifiable bibliographic information
Language	[English; other languages with an English abstract – authors to confirm]	[to be confirmed]

Source: Authors' review protocol.

The analysis combined deductive and inductive thematic coding, with the provisional domains guiding the initial reading. The coding unit was a passage expressing an argument, finding, or description of a governance practice. Coding was carried out by [number] authors using [software, e.g., NVivo, ATLAS.ti, or Microsoft Excel]; the initial codebook, derived from the four domains and the accountability lens, was expanded when passages could not be captured by existing codes, [each author coded all/a subset of the studies,] and disagreements were discussed until agreement was reached. Following [Braun and Clarke \(2019, 2021\)](#), themes are understood as patterns constructed through interpretation.

Codes were compared across sources and contexts, merged where meanings overlapped, and grouped into broader patterns ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). Because the final dimensions retain the labels of the provisional domains, the synthesis is predominantly deductive; its inductive contribution lies in new sub-themes, a cross-domain tension (cooperation designed to include communities can reproduce the privileges of established organizations), and conditional relationships between the dimensions, which constitute its main analytical outcome.

Trustworthiness followed [Nowell et al. \(2017\)](#): credibility through peer debriefing among the authors; dependability and confirmability through an audit trail of the extraction matrix, codebook, and memos; and transferability through recording each study's

context (Appendix 1). The authors' location in Muslim-majority Asian countries sensitized the analysis to majority–minority dynamics but may have shaped the reading of European evidence; counter-evidence was considered, and regime-specific patterns were reported as context-bound.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Corpus profile. The 39 studies were published between 2016 and 2026 (Appendix 1). Sixteen examine European settings, two North America, two Australia, and two Asia, while 17 are cross-national or not region-specific. Twelve are qualitative case or comparative studies, three quantitative, three literature reviews, nine normative or legal-theoretical, and 12 conceptual. The corpus is thus weighted toward European empirical evidence and conceptual or normative work.

Analytical path. The four dimensions and the cross-cutting accountability theme resulted from iterative coding (Table 3). The first cycle produced 41 initial codes, 19 deductive and 22 inductive, such as representational gatekeeping through majority churches, contract-based recognition, majoritarian procedures used against accommodation, de facto discrimination, and the politicization of dialogue by elites; the second cycle merged overlapping codes and discarded two incidental ones. Induction changed the domains in three ways: inclusive governance became coordination conditional on who controls access; the rights dimension came to include the limits of accommodation and de facto discrimination; and the dialogue dimension incorporated counter-evidence on elite instrumentalization.

Table 3. Analytical path from initial codes to themes

Theme (Final Dimension)	Sub-Themes	Initial Codes (D = Deductive; I = Inductive)	Studies (N)	Main Contexts
Inclusive institutional governance	Multilevel coordination Consultative partnerships Representational gatekeeping	Multilevel coordination (D); Interfaith councils and forums (D); Local partnerships (D); City as governance arena (I); Contract-based recognition (I); Majority-church routes into forums (I); Organized vs. everyday religion (I)	16	Germany, Scandinavia, United Kingdom, Austria, Italy, Spain, Canada, South and Southeast Asia, cross-national
Deliberative and participatory governance	Quality of influence Inclusion of under-represented groups Participation–accountability gap	Consultation (D); Voice and influence (D); Representation criteria (D); Under-represented groups (D); Symbolic recognition (I); Participation without accountability (I); Majoritarian procedures (I)	10	Indonesia, Canada, Austria, United Kingdom, Scandinavia, post-Yugoslav region, cross-national
Rights-based recognition and accommodation	Formal vs. substantive equality Contested neutrality Limits of accommodation	Freedom of religion or belief (D); Equal citizenship (D); Neutrality (D); Reasonable accommodation (D); Places of worship and spatial claims (I); Religious dress (I); Public funding and non-discrimination (I); Nonreligion (I); Gender equality	20	Cross-national, France/ECtHR, United Kingdom, Canada, United States, Hamburg, South and Southeast Asia

Theme (Final Dimension)	Sub-Themes	Initial Codes (D = Deductive; I = Inductive)	Studies (N)	Main Contexts
		and child protection as limits (I); De facto discrimination (I); Restrictions justified by public order (I)		
Dialogue-based conflict transformation	Policy-linked dialogue Processual cooperation Politicized dialogue (counter-evidence)	Interreligious dialogue (D); Peacebuilding (D); Trust-building (D); Civic education (D); Religious literacy (I); Mediation and alternative dispute resolution (I); Temporality and negotiation (I); Elite instrumentalization (I)	10	Turin, Barcelona, Germany, post-Yugoslav region, cross-national
Public accountability (cross-cutting)	Transparency and reason-giving Remedies Monitoring and evaluation	Transparency (D); Reason-giving (D); Complaints and remedies (D); Monitoring and evaluation (D); Implementation gap (I); Civic monitoring (I)	8	Indonesia, Hamburg, post-Yugoslav region, cross-national
Merged and discarded codes	—	Merged: interfaith councils and forums + local partnerships → consultative partnerships; religious literacy + civic education → civic education. Discarded (I): religious market competition; media representation of religion.	—	—

Source: Authors' coding of the 39 reviewed studies; n = number of corpus studies coded under each theme.

Inclusive institutional governance (16 studies, mostly European) shows that religious diversity is governed through relationships among governments, local authorities, courts, religious organizations, and civil society, with cities as a distinct arena ([Martinez-Ariño, 2018, 2019](#)). Councils and partnerships help authorities recognize community needs ([Griera et al., 2018](#); [Körs & Nagel, 2018](#)), yet established organizations may retain privileged access ([Galal et al., 2018](#); [Kolb, 2020](#)). In Hamburg, contracts with Muslim and Alevi communities extended recognition previously reserved for the churches ([Körs, 2019](#)). Elsewhere, Scandinavian interfaith forums are often hosted by Lutheran majority churches ([Galal et al., 2018](#)), British partnerships followed government priorities ([Prideaux & Dawson, 2018](#)), and Austria's single recognized Muslim body privileged organized religion over everyday believers ([Kolb, 2020](#)). These cases reveal three mechanisms through which consultation reproduces hierarchy: control over representative selection, dependence on dominant actors' funding or hosting, and control over agenda-setting.

Deliberative and participatory governance (10 studies) concerns the influence rather than the presence of participation ([Gherghina et al., 2021](#); [Stoeckl, 2017](#)). Negotiated contracts gave participation a binding outcome in Hamburg ([Körs, 2019](#)), whereas the recognized Muslim body in Austria remained weakly connected to everyday practice ([Kolb, 2020](#)), and in Montreal a zoning referendum enabled opponents to block places of worship ([Lefebvre, 2020](#)). Symbolic recognition can affirm belonging without conferring influence ([Chin & Levey, 2023](#)), and Indonesian village forums broadened participation without making officials answerable ([Haryanto et al., 2025](#)). Accountability-related codes appeared in eight studies across all four dimensions, including implementation gaps ([Fox,](#)

[2021](#); [Suntay, 2025](#)), funding conditions ([Perez, 2020](#)), contractual obligations ([Körs, 2019](#)), civic monitoring ([Bakrač et al., 2023](#)), and process-based accountability ([Lee & Ospina, 2022](#)), pointing to accountability as a cross-cutting requirement.

Rights-based recognition and accommodation (20 studies) reflects the gap between formal equality and substantive inclusion. Many states that guarantee religious freedom still discriminate against minorities ([Fox, 2021](#)), and such discrimination in Western democracies is associated with violence against Muslim minorities ([Suntay, 2025](#)). The gap appears in permits for places of worship ([Lefebvre, 2020](#)), religious dress, as in the acceptance of “living together” to justify the French face-veil ban ([Beaman, 2016](#)), religious schools ([Dupont, 2022](#)), and nonreligious worldviews ([Beaman et al., 2018](#)). Accommodation is bounded by Article 18(3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which permits limits only when prescribed by law and necessary to protect safety, order, health, morals, or others’ rights ([United Nations General Assembly, 1966](#)). The corpus shows how these limits are negotiated for women’s rights ([Ghanea, 2022](#)), child protection ([Jacobs & Arora, 2018](#)), and publicly funded associations ([Perez, 2020](#)), and how vague aims can justify disproportionate restrictions ([Beaman, 2016](#)). Limits on accommodation must therefore rest on proportionality rather than majority preference.

Dialogue-based conflict transformation (10 studies) is the relational dimension: it addresses the relationships and structures from which recurring conflicts arise rather than settling single disputes ([Galtung, 1969](#); [Lederach, 1997](#)). Dialogue contributed most when connected to public institutions and concrete policy concerns ([Di Placido & Palmisano, 2025](#); [Griera et al., 2018](#); [Ozzano, 2026](#)), mainly in Western European cities, and is associated with trust-building and conflict prevention ([Driessen, 2025](#)), while alternative dispute resolution has been proposed for workplace conflicts ([Rouméas, 2020](#)). Cooperation develops through continuing negotiation ([Emmerich, 2022](#)), but post-Yugoslav evidence shows that elites can instrumentalize dialogue to legitimize each other ([Bakrač et al., 2023](#)), so its contribution depends on independence and civic monitoring.

No dimension is sufficient alone. Coordination without inclusive participation preserves privilege ([Galal et al., 2018](#); [Kolb, 2020](#)); participation without rights protection can turn against minorities ([Lefebvre, 2020](#)); accommodation without accountability is applied inconsistently ([Fox, 2021](#); [Suntay, 2025](#)); and dialogue without institutional links, or captured by elites, has little influence ([Bakrač et al., 2023](#)). These configurations yield four propositions for empirical testing:

- P1: Multilevel coordination is more likely to support minority inclusion when representation criteria are transparent and access to consultative bodies does not depend on a single dominant religious actor.
- P2: Participatory procedures are more likely to protect minority claims when their outcomes are bounded by enforceable rights guarantees rather than determined by majority preference.
- P3: Accommodation policies are more likely to be implemented consistently when they are subject to reason-giving, monitoring, and accessible remedies.

P4: Interreligious dialogue is more likely to contribute to conflict transformation when it is institutionally linked to public decision-making and independent of elite legitimization strategies.

Public accountability links the four dimensions across the policy cycle by connecting representation with transparency, explanation, responsiveness, and remedies. Their integration provides institutional conditions potentially associated with equal recognition, trust, and the nonviolent management of disagreement (Bouma, 2016; Ezzy et al., 2020; Lapis, 2025). Figure 2 presents the framework, and Table 4 specifies its operation across the policy cycle.

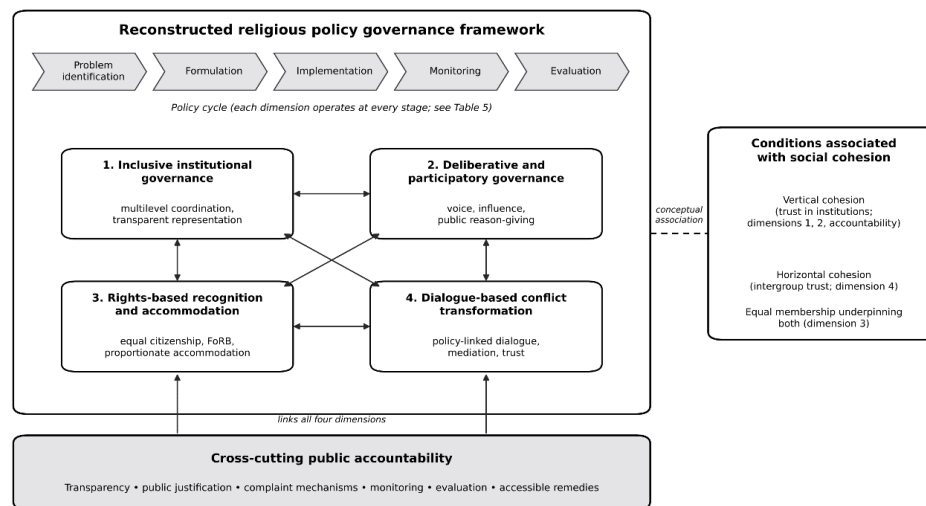


Figure 2. Integrated framework for reconstructing religious policy governance toward social cohesion
Note: All four dimensions are mutually linked and rest on public accountability as a cross-cutting layer; the dashed connector denotes a conceptual association with social cohesion.
Source: Authors' synthesis

Table 4. Operation of the four dimensions across the policy cycle

Dimension	Problem Identification	Formulation	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation
Inclusive institutional governance	Map affected actors, including unorganized and nonreligious groups	Multilevel coordination with transparent representation criteria	Clear division of responsibilities among levels and partners	Track who participates and who is absent	Review whether partnerships widened or narrowed access
Deliberative and participatory governance	Open channels for communities to raise grievances	Consultation with influence over agendas and options; public reason-giving	Community participation in delivery	Participatory monitoring and feedback	Joint evaluation of policy consequences with affected groups
Rights-based recognition and accommodation	Assess structural barriers behind formally equal rules	Proportionality-based accommodation criteria anchored in	Consistent application across institutions	Monitor discrimination and complaint patterns	Independent review (courts, ombudspersons) and accessible remedies

Dimension	Problem Identification	Formulation	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation
		FoRB and non-discrimination			
Dialogue-based conflict transformation	Dialogue platforms for early identification of tensions	Feed dialogue outcomes into policy options	Mediation and joint community initiatives	Civic monitoring of dialogue processes	Assess relational change and trust over time
Public accountability (cross-cutting)	Published criteria and data	Public justification of choices	Answerability of implementing bodies	Transparent reporting	Review and correction of policy failure

Source: Authors' synthesis derived from the framework; entries specify where each dimension is expected to operate and provide a basis for empirical testing.

Discussion

The findings call for a shift from uniform arrangements toward a relational, context-sensitive process. Associative democracy favours institutional pluralism under democratic constraints ([Bader, 2003, 2007](#)); moderate secularism accepts state cooperation with organized religion if extended to minorities ([Modood, 2012](#); [Modood & Sealy, 2022](#)); pillarization shows how inherited traditions shape opportunities for new minorities ([Maussen, 2012](#)); and Maclure and Taylor ground secularism in equal respect and freedom of conscience ([Maclure & Taylor, 2011](#)). The present framework shares the view that religion need not be excluded from public institutions but differs in its unit of analysis: it specifies how the five components interact across the policy cycle and where they break down, identifying the accountability mechanisms needed to prevent cooperation from privileging established actors ([Galal et al., 2018](#); [Kolb, 2020](#)).

Contextual adaptation should occur above a non-negotiable floor drawn from international human-rights law: freedom of religion or belief, including the narrow conditions for limiting its manifestation; equality and non-discrimination; and minority protection ([United Nations General Assembly, 1966](#), Arts. 18, 26, and 27). Above it, funding, recognition procedures, consultative structures, and religion in education may vary. Whether a contextual difference has become discrimination should not be decided by the majority or by the authority concerned; the burden of justification rests with public authorities, subject to review by courts, ombudspersons, or human-rights institutions.

These dynamics differ where the state administers religion, as in the authors' regions. In Indonesia, the 2006 Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs (No. 9 and No. 8 of 2006) established FKUB and requires 90 congregation signatures, 60 local residents' signatures, and an FKUB recommendation for a house-of-worship permit; because FKUB membership mirrors local religious composition, a harmony body can give majorities a decisive voice over minority worship, and permit disputes have met uneven compliance ([Crouch, 2014](#)). In Malaysia, the federal–state division of Islamic administration and syariah court jurisdiction have produced contested boundaries with constitutional rights, notably in conversion cases ([Moustafa, 2018](#)), and in Pakistan reserved minority seats coexist with blasphemy provisions used disproportionately against minorities ([Forte, 1994](#)).

These cases show that harmony-oriented consultation can coexist with weak rights protection and accountability. The framework travels to such settings mainly as a diagnostic tool, directing attention to the composition and decision rules of bodies such as FKUB and to the enforceability of court decisions; drawn from contextual literature, these cases illustrate rather than test its transferability.

Inclusion must be accompanied by consequential participation. Representatives in advisory councils confer little legitimacy if they cannot influence agendas or monitor implementation ([Chin & Levey, 2023](#)). Participation therefore requires transparent representation criteria, public justification, complaint procedures, and evaluation, particularly for groups that established leaders may not represent, such as women ([Ghanea, 2022](#)), nonreligious citizens ([Beaman et al., 2018](#)), converts ([Moustafa, 2018](#)), and smaller communities ([Galal et al., 2018](#)).

Rights-based recognition sets the boundaries of participation: neutral rules must be examined for their effects on minorities ([Dupont, 2022](#); [Jackson, 2016](#)), and accommodation must be assessed through proportionality, equal citizenship, gender equality, safety, and child protection ([Ghanea, 2022](#); [Jacobs & Arora, 2018](#)). Because initial decisions are usually taken by administrative agencies, sometimes advised by interfaith bodies, such bodies should advise rather than decide, and decisions affecting minority practice should be reasoned and independently reviewable. Since public-order criteria can themselves restrict minorities ([Mavelli, 2013](#); [Suntay, 2025](#)), proportionality review should require evidence of concrete risk rather than general appeals to order or to living together ([Beaman, 2016](#)), preventing established actors from dominating religious policy through ostensibly neutral criteria (RQ2).

Dialogue gives these dimensions a practical mechanism for responding to tensions, especially when public authorities participate and translate concerns into administrative responses ([Driessen, 2025](#); [Ozzano, 2026](#)), though it remains vulnerable to elite instrumentalization ([Bakrač et al., 2023](#)). The authors recommend institutionalizing it through mediation ([Rouméas, 2020](#)), civic and religious education ([Jackson, 2016](#); [Lapis, 2025](#)), joint community initiatives ([Emmerich, 2022](#)), and early-warning arrangements, the last being a recommendation derived from the framework rather than a finding of the corpus.

Complementarity does not exclude trade-offs. First, majoritarian procedures may oppose minority accommodation, as the Montreal referendum ([Lefebvre, 2020](#)) and Indonesian signature requirements ([Crouch, 2014](#)) illustrate; the framework gives rights priority, so participation shapes how accommodation is implemented but not whether core rights apply. Second, harmony discourses may suppress grievances or legitimize elites ([Bakrač et al., 2023](#)), so dialogue platforms should be linked to complaint and monitoring mechanisms. Third, broader inclusion raises coordination costs ([Lee & Ospina, 2022](#)); the framework proposes tiered inclusion, with all affected groups involved in problem identification and evaluation, and smaller, transparent, reviewable bodies in formulation and implementation. These responses address the second and third research questions.

This integration clarifies why cohesion cannot be reduced to the absence of conflict or to assimilation. Using the vertical–horizontal distinction ([Chan et al., 2006](#); [Schiefer & van](#)

[der Noll, 2017](#)), inclusive governance, deliberative participation, and accountability mainly support vertical cohesion (trust in institutions), dialogue mainly supports horizontal cohesion (trust between groups), and rights-based recognition supports both by securing equal membership ([Bouma, 2016](#); [Ezzy et al., 2020](#)). These links make the framework testable, for example by relating indicators of each dimension to survey measures of institutional and intergroup trust.

Novelty and Contribution

The novelty of this study lies in integrating four dimensions within a single policy-cycle framework. Previous work examined comparative models ([Modood & Sealy, 2022](#)), local interfaith arrangements ([Griera et al., 2018](#); [Körs & Nagel, 2018](#)), and dialogue ([Driessen, 2025](#)) largely separately, while integrative approaches provide normative principles ([Bader, 2007](#); [Modood, 2012](#)) or focus on cities ([Martínez-Ariño, 2018](#)). This study connects the dimensions across the policy cycle (Table 4), specifies their failure configurations and trade-offs, translates them into propositions P1–P4, and positions accountability as their cross-cutting mechanism. Table 5 operationalizes the framework through diagnostic questions and indicators for policymakers' self-assessment and comparative research.

Table 5. Diagnostic questions and indicative indicators for applying the framework

Dimension	Diagnostic Questions	Indicative Indicators
Inclusive institutional governance	Are representation criteria for interfaith councils and consultative bodies published? Do minority, nonreligious, and less institutionalized groups have access independent of the majority religion? Are responsibilities divided clearly between national and local authorities?	Published membership rules; composition of councils relative to population diversity; coordination protocols between levels of government.
Deliberative and participatory governance	Can participants influence agendas and options, not only comment on decisions? Do officials explain publicly how consultation inputs were used? Are women, young people, converts, and nonreligious citizens included?	Share of decisions with documented responses to consultation; frequency of public reason-giving; participation of under-represented groups.
Rights-based recognition and accommodation	Are accommodation decisions (e.g., worship permits, dress, education) based on published, consistently applied criteria? Are limits justified by proportionality and concrete evidence rather than general appeals to order? Is there an accessible complaint mechanism for minority groups?	Approval and rejection rates of minority permit applications; number and outcomes of discrimination complaints; availability of independent review (court, ombudsperson, national human-rights institution).
Dialogue-based conflict transformation	Are dialogue platforms linked to public decision-making? Are grievances raised in dialogue followed by institutional responses? Is the process independent of elite legitimation and open to civic monitoring?	Dialogue outcomes translated into administrative or policy action; existence of mediation procedures; civil society participation in monitoring.

Dimension	Diagnostic Questions	Indicative Indicators
Public accountability (cross-cutting)	Are policy reasons, implementation reports, and evaluations made public? Can affected communities challenge decisions and obtain remedies?	Publication of evaluation reports; time taken to resolve complaints; implementation of court or ombudsperson decisions.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the framework.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The study has limitations. Reliance on Scopus and mostly English-language publications may have excluded local and policy literature, and the Europe-centred corpus limits transferability; the non-Western cases in the Discussion illustrate rather than test the framework. Using provisional domains risks confirmation bias, mitigated by reporting inductive, merged, and discarded codes (Table 3), and purposive screening limits reproducibility, which Figure 2 and Appendix 1 only partly address. Without primary data, causal relationships cannot be established. Future research should test P1–P4 comparatively, particularly in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan, using interviews, longitudinal policy analysis, and the indicators in Table 5.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that religious policy governance in plural societies is best understood as a multilevel and relational process. Four interconnected dimensions (inclusive institutional governance, deliberative and participatory governance, rights-based recognition and accommodation, and dialogue-based conflict transformation) are linked throughout the policy cycle by public accountability.

For the first research question, religious policy governance can be adapted across contexts by distinguishing a non-negotiable floor of freedom of religion or belief, equality, non-discrimination, and minority protection from institutional forms that may legitimately vary, provided that authorities justify such variation and it remains subject to independent review.

For the second, participation, coordination, accountability, and accommodation can be integrated by publishing representation criteria, preventing access to consultative bodies from depending on a single dominant actor, giving rights priority over majoritarian procedures, and requiring proportionality-based justification for limits on minority practice, which addresses domination through control over representation, funding, and agenda-setting.

For the third, dialogue can be incorporated into the policy cycle by using it to identify tensions, feeding its outcomes into formulation, using mediation during implementation, and subjecting it to civic monitoring and evaluation (Table 4); it contributes to cohesion only when linked to institutional responses and protected from elite instrumentalization.

Theoretically, the study extends associative and moderate-secular accounts by specifying the policy-cycle mechanisms, failure configurations, and trade-offs through which their principles are realized or undermined. Practically, national governments should anchor

religious policy in enforceable rights and independent review; local authorities should publish representation criteria, give reasons for accommodation decisions, and provide complaint procedures; religious organizations should broaden internal representation; and interfaith bodies should link dialogue to grievance documentation, mediation, and monitoring.

Future research should test propositions P1–P4 in state-administered settings in South and Southeast Asia and relate indicators of each dimension to measures of institutional and intergroup trust.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Muhammad Ainul Yaqin contributed to the conceptualization, methodology development, and drafting of the manuscript; **Moch. Malek Ridwan** contributed to data synthesis, analysis, and critical revision; and **Shabhan Achmed** contributed to the construction of the policy framework, interpretation of the findings, and final review and approval of the manuscript.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE

During manuscript preparation, generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a limited supporting capacity to assist with language editing, organization of arguments, and preparation of visual presentation. The tools were not treated as sources of evidence, and they did not replace the authors' responsibility for the research design, interpretation of the literature, verification of references, or final conclusions. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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APPENDIX 1. STUDIES IN THE ANALYSED CORPUS (n = 39)

No.	Study	Context	Design	Dimensions Addressed
1	Bakrač et al. (2023)	Post-Yugoslav states (Western Balkans)	Conceptual	DCT, DPG, ACC
2	Beaman (2016)	France / European Court of Human Rights (S.A.S. case)	Normative or legal-theoretical analysis	RRA, SC
3	Beaman et al. (2018)	International human-rights instruments	Normative or legal-theoretical analysis	RRA
4	Bouma (2016)	Australia and comparative	Conceptual	SC
5	Breskaya et al. (2022)	Cross-national (sociology of religious freedom)	Conceptual	RRA
6	Chin & Levey (2023)	Multicultural democracies	Conceptual	RRA, DPG, ACC
7	Di Placido & Palmisano (2025)	Turin, Italy	Empirical qualitative	DCT, IIG
8	Dikici (2021)	Western Europe	Literature review	IIG, RRA
9	Driessen (2025)	Global	Literature review	DCT, SC
10	Dupont (2022)	United Kingdom (education policy)	Empirical qualitative	RRA, DPG
11	Emmerich (2022)	Germany (Muslim–Christian kindergarten)	Empirical qualitative	DCT
12	Ezzy et al. (2020)	Australia	Conceptual	SC, RRA
13	Fox (2021)	Cross-national (Religion and State dataset)	Quantitative	RRA, ACC
14	Galal et al. (2018)	Denmark, Norway, Sweden	Empirical qualitative	IIG, DPG
15	Ghanea (2022)	International human-rights law	Normative or legal-theoretical analysis	RRA
16	Gherghina et al. (2021)	Cross-national (deliberative democracy)	Conceptual	DPG
17	Griera et al. (2018)	Barcelona, Spain, and Turin, Italy	Empirical qualitative	IIG, DCT
18	Griera & Nagel (2018)	Europe	Conceptual	IIG, DCT
19	Haryanto et al. (2025)	Indonesia (village governance)	Empirical qualitative	DPG, ACC
20	Jackson (2016)	Council of Europe member states	Normative or legal-theoretical analysis	RRA, SC
21	Jacobs & Arora (2018)	United States (law and bioethics)	Normative or legal-theoretical analysis	RRA
22	Kolb (2020)	Austria	Empirical qualitative	IIG, DPG
23	Koppelman (2018)	Constitutional and human-rights theory	Normative or legal-theoretical analysis	RRA
24	Körs (2019)	Hamburg, Germany	Empirical qualitative	IIG, ACC, RRA
25	Körs & Nagel (2018)	Germany (local interfaith governance)	Empirical qualitative	IIG, DCT
26	Lapis (2025)	International religious-education research	Literature review	SC, DCT
27	Lee & Ospina (2022)	Collaborative governance (general)	Conceptual	ACC, IIG
28	Lefebvre (2020)	Quebec and Montreal, Canada	Empirical qualitative	RRA, DPG, IIG

No.	Study	Context	Design	Dimensions Addressed
29	Martínez-Ariño (2018)	European cities	Conceptual	IIG
30	Martínez-Ariño (2019)	Cities (cross-national)	Conceptual	IIG
31	Modood & Sealy (2022)	Global comparative framework	Conceptual	IIG, RRA
32	Ozzano (2026)	Europe (local governance)	Conceptual	DCT, IIG
33	Perez (2020)	ECtHR, United Kingdom, United States, Canada	Normative or legal-theoretical analysis	RRA, ACC
34	Prideaux & Dawson (2018)	Leeds, United Kingdom	Empirical qualitative	IIG, DPG
35	Ramos et al. (2019)	Cross-national survey data	Quantitative	SC
36	Rouméas (2020)	Workplaces in liberal democracies	Normative or legal-theoretical analysis	DCT, RRA
37	Sealy et al. (2022)	South and Southeast Asia	Empirical qualitative	IIG, RRA
38	Stoeckl (2017)	Political liberalism (theory)	Normative or legal-theoretical analysis	DPG, RRA
39	Suntay (2025)	Western democracies	Quantitative	RRA, ACC

Note: IIG = inclusive institutional governance; DPG = deliberative and participatory governance; RRA = rights-based recognition and accommodation; DCT = dialogue-based conflict transformation; ACC = public accountability (cross-cutting); SC = social cohesion (outcome concept). The first dimension listed is the primary one.