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# TRUST, LEGITIMACY, AND SECURITISED ENGAGEMENT: MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND CVE IN AUSTRALIA

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## ABSTRACT

*After the 9/11 attacks on the USA, policies for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in Western democracies increasingly relied on engaging communities to address radicalisation. However, many studies suggest that focusing on communities creates what they call a 'suspect community.' They question whether such engagement is a real partnership or just another form of state control. In this context, religious leaders play an important role in the Muslim community as representatives and mediators. This study examines how Muslim religious leaders in Australia view and experience state-led P/CVE initiatives. It pays particular attention to trust, legitimacy, and participation. Based on semi-structured qualitative interviews with 15 Muslim Sunni religious leaders, the study shows that distrust of P/CVE is not just an attitude; it is built into how engagement practices are designed and carried out. Participants consistently describe engagement as performative and politicised. They note limited influence, set agendas, and gaps in continuity within institutions. Furthermore, P/CVE initiatives are often seen through a lens of security. Funding mechanisms, reporting requirements, and program structures are associated with surveillance and intelligence-gathering. This article contributes to ongoing discussions by redefining trust in P/CVE as a complicated and mediated process influenced by institutional practices, security-based governance, and outside political narratives. It argues that community engagement in P/CVE is less about building trust and more about governance, which may end up reproducing the distrust it aims to eliminate. These findings stress the importance of critically reassessing participatory frameworks in counter-extremism policy and moving towards real co-production and less security-focused approaches.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism; Muslim Communities; Procedural Justice; Religious Leadership; Trust; Community Engagement; Australia.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In response to the evolving threat of violent extremism after the 9/11 attacks on the United States of America, governments across Western democracies have increasingly adopted Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) strategies that emphasise community engagement as a central component of counterterrorism policy. While there is disagreement on the definition of P/CVE, 'the concept of P/CVE refers to the programs and policies for countering and preventing radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism and terrorism as part of an overall counter-terrorism strategy and framework' (Zeiger et al. 2015, p. 67). As such, P/CVE in this study refers to any programs, initiatives and projects aimed at combatting the threat posed by home-grown extremism.

In Australia, the importance of community engagement in countering radicalisation and extremism has been acknowledged by researchers and in government publications (such as the Counter Terrorism Strategy, several white papers, and National Plans 2004, 2010, and 2015). As stated within the Counter Terrorism (CT) White Paper (2010, p. 67), 'a critical partner in protecting Australia from terrorism, and a valuable source of information regarding terrorist related activity, are local communities.

Recently, the Bondi terrorist attack on the Jewish community in Australia and the debate that followed the incident have focused on the role of communities in preventing radicalisation and violent extremism. In particular, religious leaders, who frequently face expectations to counter extremist narratives and assist government-led counterterrorism initiatives actively.

Existing research regarding P/CVE has primarily focused on policy frameworks, the effectiveness of government strategies, or community attitudes toward counterterrorism policies in general (Al-hammadin 2025, Pistone 2019, Gielen 2019). Less attention has been given to the perspectives of religious leaders themselves, particularly regarding their experiences with government engagement and their views on the role they are expected to play in preventing radicalisation among Muslim youth.

Religious leaders typically possess Islamic education and knowledge and are often able to address questions and provide guidance on both religious and contemporary social and political matters. However, there is a distinction between religious leaders in the Sunni and Shia sects, particularly in their legitimacy. In Sunni Muslim

religious leaders do not have religious authority and leadership; however, the Shia sect is required to follow the orders of their Ayat, which means less questioning by the public. This is one of the reasons this study focuses on Sunni Muslim.

The role of religious leaders in P/CVE and deradicalisation programs has gained increasing importance for several interrelated reasons. Many of them enjoyed a trusted relationship within their community, their relationships with the government and their deep understanding of religious text (Mandaville 2017). These characteristics qualify them to challenge violent extremist groups' narrative and offer alternative understandings of faith.

This study aimed to explore the perspective of Muslim religious leaders with respect to government efforts to engage young Muslims in P/CVE initiatives in Australia. The experiences and perspectives of religious leaders in this research will offer deeper insights into the main factors impacting community engagement in counter-extremism policies. The significance of understanding these perspectives will be critical for developing more effective and trust-based engagement strategies that recognise the social and religious dynamics within Muslim communities. In addition, the outcome of this research may contribute to developing evidence-based intervention programmes and initiatives that could empower young people to play a proactive role in countering extremism within their communities.

The study is structured according to the conventional design of qualitative research. It starts with a literature review section that examines the most up-to-date research on Muslim communities, religious leaders, and young Muslims' relationships with government in the context of P/CVE. The literature review concludes by identifying the research gap and outlining the theoretical framework. The second section examines the methodology and research design which are used to address the research questions. This section includes how the participants have been chosen, data collection and analysis. The findings are presented through a thematic analysis, highlighting key themes supported by illustrative quotes. This is followed by a discussion of the findings and, finally, the conclusion.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Community Engagement in Counterterrorism*

**The Role of Religious Leaders in Countering Extremism** Engaging Muslim leaders and young Muslims in P/CVE efforts has been perceived as central to mitigating the risks of terrorism and

avoiding the backlash of government efforts to tackle extremism. Scholars such as (M. H. Grossman 2022, Hartley 2022, Spalek 2014), have underlined the significance of the engagement of religious leaders in government efforts to tackle extremism, which could take many forms, such as delivering lectures in mosques about integration, social cohesion, how to deal with extremist ideas, and discussing different ideologies in Islam.

A study by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP 2017) confirms the growing importance of religious actors in P/CVE policy (Mandaville 2017). Acknowledging the impact of religious leaders on political discourse, the USIP calls on the government to include them in all spheres of governance. Also, Grossman and Tahiri (2015) assert that the role of religious leaders is critical in any strategy to build trust and to engage the Muslim community (M. & Grossman 2015). While the role of religious leaders is significant, as the studies above have indicated, placing even more pressure on religious leaders, as they are somehow in touch with problematic youth, may not always be true.

**Trust and Legitimacy in Counterterrorism Policies** Trust is a critical factor in determining the success of community-based counter-extremism strategies (NIJ 2023). Tyler (2006) asserts that 'perceptions of procedural justice lead to beliefs about institutional legitimacy, which, in turn, foster compliance with the law and cooperation with the police' (Bolger 2019, T. Tyler 2006). Research indicates that communities are more likely to cooperate with authorities when they perceive institutions as legitimate and fair (Mazerolle 2013). Conversely, perceptions of surveillance, profiling, and discrimination can undermine trust and reduce willingness to engage with government initiatives. These dynamics may influence how religious leaders perceive their engagement with government initiatives.

Furthermore, some studies indicate that religious and community leaders have not been satisfied with their communication with the authorities, nor do they feel trusted by the government (Hartley 2022, NIJ 2023, Roude 2017, M. & Grossman 2015). Jones (2019) found that Muslim religious leaders have been under considerable pressure because of over-consultation by government groups, police, academics, and the media (Jones 2019). According to Cherney et al. (2017), the consequences of such feelings and stigma would lead to general unwillingness to cooperate with CVE and Counterterrorism (CT) (Cherney 2017, Murphy 2015). In addition, some sheiks and Imams, as reported by

Jones (2022), did not encourage young people to participate in P/CVE because of negative perceptions of them and a lack of trust in the government (C. Jones 2022). In this context, Procedural Justice Theory suggests that individuals are more willing to cooperate with authorities when they believe they are treated fairly and respectfully (Bolger 2019). If communities perceive counterterrorism policies as discriminatory or targeting specific groups, trust in authorities may decline, reducing cooperation (Baumann 2025).

Moreover, Dun et al (2016) assert that the police sometimes choose people who provide scandalising comments that reinforce stereotypes (W. D. Charkawi 2021). While studies such as Grossman and Tahiri (2015) and Dunn et al. (2016) raise concerns about certain religious and community leaders, they may underestimate that the media exaggerate statements by religious leaders and cast them as enemies of the state, leading to misrepresentation. In contrast, other studies, such as Jason and Faris (2019), argue that religious leaders who may not be the media and government's preferred choice for engagement often hold significant influence within the Muslim community, particularly among young Muslims. The problem is that Muslims are not a unified group, and their leadership is not unified either. So, choosing a representative is a significant problem faced by P/CVE engagement strategies

**Credibility of Religious Leaders** Other studies have suggested that the government may have consulted with the wrong people or with religious leaders who may not have the intended influence, trust, and/or legitimacy in the Muslim community (Pauwels 2020, W. K.-M. Charkawi 2021, Roude 2017) The Policy Exchange report *Choosing our Friends Wisely* described the U.K. police and local authorities as unsuited to differentiating the good people from the bad (Frampton 2017). This is because it is not necessarily the case that bad people for the police are bad people for young Muslims. Police officers could make a mistake if they engage with religious leaders with insufficient legitimacy and trust in the Muslim community. The results of the study by Hartley and Faris (2020) on the legitimacy of religious leaders revealed cases where Muslim leaders trusted by Muslim communities are not trusted by police, and Muslim leaders not trusted by police are trusted by Muslim communities (Hartley 2022). While there is a lack of evidence-based studies indicating that building trust with religious leaders will guarantee access to hard-to-reach young Muslims, the role of the religious leader in building effective community engagement cannot be ignored.

## 2.2. External Factors Shaping Muslim Engagement in P/CVE

**Foreign policy, media, and political rhetoric** In Australia, many researchers find four main external factors that could prevent the community at large from engaging in productive cooperation with the government. Roude (2017) suggests that addressing political rhetoric against Muslims could increase and enhance the community's P/CVE engagement. However, she relied only on the perspectives of Muslim leaders, many of whom expressed a lack of knowledge about CVE (Roude 2017). Political rhetoric and public commentary contribute to increasing Muslim alienation, in particular among young Muslims. In a focus group study conducted by Bull and Rane (2019) in Southeast Queensland. Their results suggest that politicians' rhetoric increases young Muslims' distrust in government and media through divisive language that creates a sense of 'us versus them' or 'othering' (Bull 2019). For example, in 2014, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott made comments about Australian Muslims protesting counterterrorism police tactics, suggesting they should reflect on themselves and referring to the police operation as a 'show of strength' (Abdalla 2012, Bull 2019).

Furthermore, Media portrayals of Islam and Muslims have been widely criticised for reinforcing negative stereotypes, which can contribute to feelings of marginalisation and distrust. a study by Grossman and Tahuri (2015), which similarly observed the adverse impact of media portrayals of Islam and Muslims on the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Australia (Bull 2019, M. & Grossman 2015)

Charkawi (2021) found that structural factors such as damaging political discourse, negative media portrayal, Islamophobia, and racism increase the risk of radicalisation and violence among young Muslims (W. D. Charkawi 2021).

CT measures have a great likelihood of constructing Muslims as a suspect community, not only in the eyes of the public but for Muslims themselves, impacting government efforts to build cooperation with the Muslim community in CT and CVE (Awan 2012, Nguyen 2019, Cherney 2017). The Australian government's review of its own counterterrorism legislation also recognised that it has the potential to cause 'negative effects upon minority communities' (Security Legislation Review Committee 2006, p. 142). Jones (2019) concludes that the lack of genuine grassroots consultation in policy formulation, the lack of real connection to the actual problems experienced by young people, and the lack

of understanding of the cultural, ethnic, and religious nuances have led to a lack of community participation and trust, which could have serious consequences for any successful intervention programs.

## 2.3. Research Gap

While Muslim community engagement in P/CVE Australia consider important for the success of counter terrorism policies in general, few studies have managed to really on primary resources on the effectiveness of this engagement. Previous studies have insufficient attention to the dynamics of relationship construction between religious leaders, state and young Muslims in the P/CVE context. Limited attention to how religious leaders themselves perceive and experience government-led P/CVE initiatives. there is a lack of research examining how these actors navigate competing expectations, construct their role in influencing young Muslims, and assess the legitimacy of state engagement strategies. This limits the development of theoretically informed, empirically grounded models of trust and engagement that capture the complexity of these interactions.

This study addresses this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of Muslim religious leaders' perspectives on government engagement in Australia. The study will answer the main research question of how do Muslim religious leaders perceive and engage with government-led P/CVE initiatives in Australia? This will have sub questions

1. What institutional and contextual factors shape trust and distrust toward CVE initiatives?
2. How do media narratives and international political dynamics influence perceptions of CVE?
3. How do religious leaders mediate relationships between Muslim communities and the state in the context of countering extremism?

## 2.4. Theoretical Framework

### 2.5. Procedural Justice Theory (PJT)

**Procedural Justice Theory (PJT), most prominently developed by**

Tom R. Tyler developed procedural justice theory to explain why local communities comply and cooperate when interacting with police officers or authority representatives in general. The framework suggests that these compliance and cooperation are a result of fairness, legitimacy and respectful treatment by authorities' representatives (T. R. Tyler 2006). PJT

argues that individuals are more likely to cooperate with institutions when they perceive decision-making processes as fair, inclusive, and unbiased (T. R. Tyler 2023).

In the context of P/CVE, using PJT as a theoretical framework is relevant to studying minority communities because P/CVE policies are fundamentally dependent on voluntary cooperation from communities, particularly in contexts where state authorities rely on trust-based engagement rather than enforcement alone.

Understanding why communities choose to engage with government or disengage needs a framework that directly explains the dynamics of the relationship between institutional behaviour and public trust. PJT provides this explanatory mechanism by linking perceptions of procedural fairness to legitimacy and, ultimately, to cooperation.

In the context of this study trust, legitimacy and securitisation are seen as related concepts but analytically distinct. Trust is when communities and religious leaders are willing to cooperate with government institutions because they believe they are fair, transparent, and good intended. Legitimacy is the sense of "right" and "credibility" of institutional authority and policies, specifically the belief that government action is right and fair to the community. Securitisation, in contrast, is the security and risk-management logic applied to social or community problems, in which social or community problems are defined in terms of a security shift and the development of a Muslim community as a potential threat that must be monitored and intervened into.

PJT helps to answer the question of how procedural fairness can contribute to legitimacy and trust, but securitisation processes have the potential to reduce these effects, as the processes of engagement become linked with the processes of surveillance and control. Understanding these concepts can help to understand why community engagement in P/CVE can be a challenge even when there are consultation mechanisms in place.

Muslim communities in Australia perceived CVE initiatives and policies as tools for security surveillance and securitising. These questions of fairness, voice, and neutrality become central (Sohrabi 2015). PJT is therefore suited to this study because it explains how the practice of government institutional such as police consultation with communities, shapes trust outcomes. It moves the analysis beyond descriptive accounts of distrust to a theoretically grounded explanation of how distrust is produced.

Importantly, this study extends PJT in two ways.

First, it situates procedural justice within a broader structural and political context. This means that the perception of fairness by communities is influenced not only by direct interactions with authorities but also by media narratives and foreign policy. Second, it introduces religious leaders as mediators of procedural justice, whose legitimacy can reinforce or weaken trust between the state and Muslim communities.

Accordingly, PJT serves as the central theoretical framework of this study, providing both an analytical lens and an explanatory model for understanding trust, legitimacy, and engagement in P/CVE

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which allows participants to articulate their lived experiences, providing deeper insights into the complex relationships between Muslim communities, religious leadership, and government-led CVE initiatives. Given that terrorism and CVE are sensitive topics in particular with Muslim community, this approach enables the researcher to capture nuanced perspectives that may not be achieved using other methodologies (Creswell. J 2009).

#### 3.2. Participants and Sampling

As stated previously, the study chose participants from Muslim Sunni religious leaders of Arab background in Australia. The decision to focus on Sunni Arab participants mirrors the nature of Sunni religious leadership, spiritual authority, and the diversity within Muslim communities in Australia. On the other hand, Shia religious hierarchies are more centralised; Sunni religious leadership is less centralised, which makes the influence and legitimacy of religious leaders more context-dependent.

The selection criteria have relied on purposive sampling as a common method in choosing informative and well-experienced participants. It allows researchers to identify individuals with relevant experience and knowledge of the topic. The criteria include Imams with direct or indirect experience in government engagement programs, community initiatives, or P/CVE-related discussions. To communicate with participants, an extensive discussion with the research team was conducted in the early stages to carefully craft the letters and emails that were to be sent to prospective participants. A list of fifteen prospective religious

leaders was prepared by the researcher and the team, building on their knowledge of their community, their involvement in social work and communication with the community.

### 3.3. Data Collection

The study employed semi-structured interviews. This strategy allows participants to discuss their lived experiences freely while enabling the researcher to guide the conversation around key research themes.

Some Interviews were conducted in person and others through online tools such as the Zoom platform. Participants were informed of the nature of the question, and a consensus form was obtained from every participant before conducting the study. The process followed the University of South Australia guidelines on the ethical procedure for research on humans and animals. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

In analysing the data, the study adopts a thematic analysis strategy, which is widely used in qualitative research to identify patterns and themes within interview data (Lochmiller 2021). The process of analysing data follows the protocol of this strategy through its six stages. Beginning with familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, secondly, an initial coding starts with key ideas and statements that were identified from the transcripts. This was then followed by grouping codes extracted into broader themes related to trust, legitimacy, government engagement, and perceptions of radicalisation, and finally the interpretation of these themes in relation to the theoretical framework of procedural justice, securitisation, and critical terrorism studies. Participants' identities were anonymised to protect their privacy and ensure confidentiality. All interview data were securely stored in the University of South Australia, and identifying details were removed from transcripts.

## 4. FINDINGS/ANALYSIS

This study aimed at exploring how do Muslim religious leaders perceive and engage with government-led P/CVE initiatives in Australia as a main question, in addition to the sub question mentioned earlier in this study. The data analysis indicates that there are four interrelated themes emerged from the data:

1. The engagement with Muslim community is Performative and politicised
2. Mistrust is due to Securitisation and institutional practices
3. Structural factors such as Media and geopolitical influences on perception
4. The role of Religious leaders appear as contested mediators of engagement

### Theme 1: Performative and Politicised Engagement

#### Subtheme 1.1: Consultation Without Influence

The nature of engagement in CVE meetings is described by Religious leaders as symbolic rather than genuinely participatory. The perception that their voices are not heard and that they have provided with limited opportunities to engage meaningfully in these meetings is reflected in these statements:

"You know, we've gone to these meetings, we have expressed our views, and nothing has happened. It's just a box-ticking exercise for these different agencies so they can say they're engaging with us, but nothing happens. (Religious leader 04)

The frustration from these meetings are a shared theme among many participants, which suggests that it is institutional not individual practices.

Why should I attend.... Am I not going to be listened to? My opinion will not be accounted for, even though they will be listening. I see a change where they will listen to us, and I will go. (Religious leader 17).

These sentiments hide a deeper understanding that government representatives have decided early the agenda of these meeting. Many participants felt that the meetings are not for discussion with community representatives but to fill out reports of meetings as an evident of community engagement.

My experience with police and government has been many of these meetings that I've attended, and they've already come to conclusions. They're not coming for discussion; they've come with conclusions, and then they come and say, basically, this is what we need you to do. (Religious leader 11)

#### Subtheme 1.2 Politicisation

In the same connotation, political institutions appear generally as distrusted by many respondents. P/CVE initiatives were frequently perceived as politically motivated efforts aimed at demonstrating action to the wider public.. As one participant observed:

"There is a sense that these programs are designed to demonstrate action to the wider public, rather than to genuinely address the underlying issues within communities." (Religious Leader 12)

In addition, many participants believe that supporting and enhancing the chances of political leaders who sympathise with Muslim issues is important. It was also recommended that young Muslims themselves run for parliament and participate in the political system.

One of the politicians who has been very vocal in support of the Muslims had a lot of young Muslims in his area, going out and supporting him in distributing flyers and stuff. (Religious leaders 14)

Furthermore, the Australian government and political leaders calling on Muslim leaders to condemn terrorism each time a terrorist incident occurs is sending the wrong message about Islam and Muslims to the public. The effects on religious leaders are very damaging to CVE.

The government constantly calls upon the Muslim community and Muslim leaders to condemn terrorism, as if somehow Muslims are complicit in what happens overseas. (Religious leader 03)

Framing P/CVE initiatives as a politically instrumental project may lead to undermines its credibility among community stakeholders.

### **Subtheme 1.3: Institutional Repetition and Lack of Continuity**

A recurring concern was the problem of staff changing who are responsible for community engagement process and the feeling of limited consistency in Muslim engagement.

"Government departments with new staff come and do the same thing that the staff before them have done... the communication is the same, and no change happens." (Religious leader 14)

"You do feel like there's an element of time wasted when you put effort into working with individuals who may get promoted or move to another department." (Religious leader 18)

This feeling has led many participants to disengage from the community engagement meeting related to P/CVE, as community actors feel that their prior contributions have not been meaningfully incorporated.

## **Theme 2: Securitisation and Institutional Mistrust**

### **Subtheme 2.1: Perceptions of Surveillance and Suspicion**

One important finding of this study is the participants believe that the government used P/CVE as intelligence purposes such as surveillance on Muslim community. Unlike previous research focusing primarily on distrust of intentions, religious leaders highlighted concerns about how programs operate in practice

A religious leader who had long experience

working with CVE said:

Most of the young Muslims say that it is a way of spying on them, taking information from them and giving it to the authorities. (Religious leader 03)

"When people know a grant is CVE related, they don't apply for it... they think it's about snitching on the community. (Religious leader 15)

Funding structures play a critical role in reinforcing this perception. Many participants view the government funding allocated to CVE programs as unacceptable because of the conditions attached to it. These conditions include reporting on the behaviour and changes in young Muslim attendees, as well as their level of extremism. Many participants view these conditions as a means of gathering information and surveillance on the Muslim community. A religious leader explains:

Yes, I believe that CVE programs should never be funded by the government. Because especially. The intelligence of the police or these organisations, because people will think, you know, it will create some doubts. (Religious leader 04)

In addition, many religious leaders expressed concerns about the problem of establishing the effectiveness of CVE, which is required by the funding organisation.

"Organisations running these programs are required to report back to the minister on every participant... and even give evidence in court." (Religious leader 18)

The constraints posed by funding criteria highlight the need to report back on the outcomes. This requirement can be burdensome, as it demands running programs and identifying youth who might be at risk of extremism.

### **Subtheme 2.3: Lack of Transparency and Information**

Closely related to surveillance concerns is the issue of limited transparency. Religious leaders believe that the lack of clear communication from the government when establishing CVE programs leads to young Muslims' distrust in the government

"The major factor in these programs is transparency... everything from financial matters to educational matters must be clear. (Religious leader 13)

Religious leaders also believe that not only does the government need to be transparent, but also Islamic organisations that host CVE programs. That is, transparency on the part of government and Islamic organisations could enhance young Muslims' trust in CVE programs and engagement.

"Muslims have no clear information about how CVE is working... the information provided is not

sufficient.” (Religious leader 17)

This lack of transparency affects not only community members but also religious leaders themselves, who may struggle to explain or justify participation in CVE initiatives.

#### **Subtheme 2.4: Perceptions of Targeting and Islamophobia**

Religious leaders believe that the government’s soft hand on far-right, white extremists compared to their hard approach with young Muslims may have caused distrust in government efforts to engage young Muslims in CVE:

I think the lack of seriousness against far-right extremism versus the over-policing of the Muslim community is a factor 100% because that adds to that mistrust. (Religious leader 15)

Some of the religious leaders stressed that the government’s Islamophobic rhetoric increases young people’s feelings that the government is against them. This, they argued, enhances distrust in government:

The element of injustice towards Islam, the element of targeting is not all Muslims, the element of Islamophobia is there, and that element. And I do believe that it needs to be countered. (Religious leader 17)

The participants argued that the government’s Islamophobic rhetoric portrays Muslims as a threat to be managed and controlled. Further, the government has not only accomplished little to protect Muslims from Islamophobia but also facilitated it, which has exacerbated distrust in government and its CVE programs.

Theme 3: Media Narratives and Global Influences

#### **Subtheme 3.1: Foreign Policy and Community Perceptions**

Religious leaders emphasised that perceptions of CVE are shaped not only by domestic policies but also by media representations and international politics.

A key issue identified was the impact of Australian foreign policy in relation to conflict in Muslim countries. Most religious leaders in this study suggest that the Australian government’s involvement in overseas conflicts in the Middle East and its support for American foreign policy have negatively impacted domestic policy regarding CVE and young Muslims’ engagement.

“It’s dangerous to separate what happens internationally from what happens locally... they are very much connected. (Religious leader 03)

“Poor government foreign policy is one of the factors affecting young Muslim engagement in CVE. (Religious leader 09)

Concern for the Ummah (global Islamic community) is significant to many young Muslims, and it gives them a feeling of a religious duty to support, defend, or at least feel with their brothers and sisters across the world.

“When Muslims see Western governments involved in conflicts in Muslim countries, they form the view that the government does not wish well for Muslims.” (Religious leader 11)

“We have what is called the bond of brotherhood and sisterhood... so these global events affect local perceptions.” (Religious leader 04)

The impact of Australian foreign policy on the young Muslim and religious leaders’ engagement with P/CVE is significant. This suggests that the impact of CVE goes beyond national boundaries to Australia, situating it within a broader transnational moral and political framework.

#### **Subtheme 3.2: Problematic Framing of Islam**

Religious leaders believe that the using of the +9 terms such as ‘Islamic Extremism’ point out the damaging impact of labelling extremism as ‘Islamic’. They argue that using terms like ‘Islamic extremism’ wrongly associates terrorism and extremism with Islam, which is harmful and incorrect.

Well, the narrative has been very damaging, very, very, very damaging. When they use terms like Islamic extremism, there is nothing Islamic about terrorism or extremism. (Religious leader 03)

Another religious leader expressed concerns that the negative portrayal of Muslims could lead the Australian public to construct all Muslims as at risk of radicalisation. That would increase alienation and the lack of a sense of belonging.

There are lots of people in Australia who have yet to even meet a Muslim. So, what they see on TV, the public believes it. When the media portrays Muslims as barbaric and extremist, it reinforces stereotypes. (Religious leader 14)

#### **Subtheme 3.3: Blurred Boundaries Between Media and Government**

Notable finding in this study is the perception among some community members that the media and government operate in alignment. According to a religious leader, many young Muslims struggle to differentiate between the government and media in terms of their causal relationships, with some believing that they are complicit and that the government can influence the media. The religious leader explains:

They don’t perceive what the media is saying as different from the stance or position of the government. This lack of understanding has a huge influence on the engagement of the community and

youngsters when it comes to CVE. (Religious leader 01)

The failure among young Muslims to understand the relationship between the government and the media can pose a challenge to their engagement with CVE. Another religious leader states,

Some people even think that the media is part of the government. And then they think that the whole system is working against them. (Religious leader 04)

Participants also pointed to imbalances in media attention across different forms of extremism. This was seen as reinforcing the perception that CVE disproportionately targets Muslim communities.

“There is a perception that not all forms of extremism receive the same level of attention, which shapes public understanding.” (Religious Leader 09)

Such asymmetries contribute to a broader narrative of selective scrutiny and representation.

#### **Theme 4: Religious Leaders as contested mediators of engagement**

##### **Subtheme 4.1 Religious Leaders as Ideological Counter-actors**

Participants believed that extremism is primarily ideological and therefore should be countered through religious narratives or through dialogue conducted by experienced or specialist religious scholars. A religious leader who worked in the field of CVE states:

The people who can counter [extreme] ideology are the people who can speak the language of the ideology, and that is our religious leaders and educators. (Religious leader 01)

However, participants expressed frustration over the lack of official acknowledgement from the government regarding the important role played by religious leaders in countering extremist ideology.

Some of the religious leaders do CVE on a daily basis. They’re engaging with young Muslims who are coming to them with very obscure and heretic theological posturing, and without getting funded by the government. Leaders on a federal level are making statements that are perceived to be at best antagonistic towards Muslims and non-appreciative of the efforts that Muslim community leaders have been doing in countering violent extremism. (Religious Leader 12)

Religious leaders are positioned as key actors in this space, given their capacity to engage with both religious discourse and community dynamics

Despite their potential role, Religious leaders are faced with dual legitimacy. Participants assert that Religious leaders are keen to work for their community, and at the same time must comply with government requirements to counter violent

extremism. Engagement with government initiatives can lead to suspicion within the community

If people knew that I was participating in CVE, I’d be met with scepticism and probably spoken badly about; I don’t think they would think that I’m selling out or whatever for working with the government. I (Religious leader 04)

The point is that countering extremist ideologies by qualified people, such as Muslim religious leaders, can pave the way for engagement in CVE programs by the so-called hard-to-reach groups.

##### **Subtheme 4.2 Mistrust Challenge between Religious Leaders and Young Muslims**

One of the reasons for mistrust of religious leaders by young Muslims is due to their fear and/or incompetence in addressing controversial issues such as Jihad and related topics. A young Muslim who has been trained to work as an Imam believes that if the Imams avoid discussing these problematic terms publicly, it could lead to mistrust and be detrimental to young Muslims’ engagement with CVE:

They need to feel like it’s fine for me to talk about jihad. I can talk about fighting jihad because the young person wants to know, and if he doesn’t find the answer from the respected, reputed Sheikh, he’s going to look for it somewhere else. They talk about all the different kinds of jihad except for the fighting jihad. (Religious Leader 10)

Religious leaders may feel concerned to publicly discuss controversial terms in Islam due to the fear of being accused of extremism by media, political leaders or government agencies, as the following religious leader indicated,

The problem was, you know, the leaders were scared, and I understand I’m not condemning or criticising, you know, that people have dedicated their life to learning and studying so that people like me can learn from them, It’s a very difficult position that they found themselves in because to stand up and speak about certain things, truthfully, would put them in a very, very dangerous and difficult position in their own personal lives. (Religious Leader 08)

Religious leaders believe building trust with young people would be achieved through opening the space for more young people’s conversations on a broad topic, including CVE, and then allowing them to lead the process and claim ownership.

To educate by having conversations, which are built on trust. So, the first thing that comes to mind is trust. Trust, I think, happens by supporting them when they need support, and not judging them. (Religious leader 03)

The result of avoiding discussing religious terms

by religious leaders could lead young Muslims to distrust them. It could create a vacuum and space for terrorist groups to step in and work to recruit young Muslims.

#### **Subtheme 4.3: Generational Gap and Communication**

Participants also highlighted internal challenges over the lack of communication between young Muslims and religious leaders, especially on contemporary issues. They believe that the rhetoric of religious leaders has become obsolete and does not answer to young Muslims' needs.

I think a lot of times they ( young Muslims) don't trust them [religious leaders] because they see that religious leaders are not engaging in difficult conversations, in conversations that affect their lives. (Religious leader 19)

We have a lot of imams who are trained overseas in Madrassahs, who would not understand the geopolitics and would not be able to engage in conversations. (Religious Leader 04)

Some religious leader participants also believe there is a generational gap. Religious leaders usually enjoy a long career, which makes the generational gap with the young people wider and wider. Many religious leaders are now getting older, and there are hardly any new Imams taking on the responsibility.

The ones [religious leaders] who are born and raised in Australia, struggling to engage with young people because of the generational gap, and I see that my connection to the young was not locked 15 or 10 years ago, as I would say, there's a big generation gap; there is a different mindset. (Religious leader 07)

**Subtheme 4.4: Toward Community-Led Solutions** A consistent recommendation across participants was the need for community-driven approaches to CVE. Many religious leader participants believe that when the Muslim community informs CVE initiatives, the success and effectiveness of CVE will be enhanced.

It should be informed by the community with heavy engagement from the community, with an aim to countering ideologies and extremism rather than looking for people to arrest or put in jail. (Religious leader 02)

A successful CVE that engages young Muslims should have close cooperation and consultation with the Muslim community. Based on many religious leader participants' responses, addressing the causes of extremism is part of the success of CVE programs and initiatives. The community approach will be more sustainable:

Well, I think if the government wants to have real success in theory, it needs to work with the Muslim

community and design programs with the Muslim community that address the causes of extremism. (Religious leader 15)

Religious leaders who had worked in educational institutions believed that schools may be the best places for introducing CVE programs designed by the community; however, this group of religious leaders did not agree on naming these programs as CVE. Based on this group response, schools are the best places to build a sense of belonging and trust.

I think these programs need to be introduced through the education system. Education, yeah, and not, not critical, not in a way that's critical of any religion. (Religious leader 18)

#### **4.1. Summary of the Findings Chapter**

This chapter examined how religious leaders perceive government-led P/CVE initiatives. The findings highlight significant concerns around performative engagement, securitisation, and declining institutional trust.

First, the findings show that engagement is largely perceived as symbolic rather than substantive. This reinforces perceptions of top-down governance and contributes to disengagement and distrust. In this context, CVE has been seen as politicised and oriented toward signalling action rather than addressing the underlying causes of extremism.

Second, CVE initiatives are widely viewed as securitised and surveillance-oriented tools aimed at the Muslim community. Government funding and reporting requirements are interpreted as an indirect intelligence-gathering mechanism. Participants also perceive injustice against Muslim communities compared to other forms of extremism. Feelings of Islamophobia, compounded by limited transparency in program objectives and processes, have been expressed.

Third, the findings highlight the strong influence of external factors, such as media narratives, International conflicts, and foreign policy positions, on shaping local perceptions and intensifying mistrust. This is more noticeable among younger Muslims who interpret these issues through religious and collective identity lenses.

Finally, the study shows that religious leaders occupy a contested intermediary role. While the government expected them to counter extremist narratives, they are constrained by limited institutional recognition, community suspicion, and internal challenges, including generational divides and communication barriers.

Diagram 1 presents the conceptual model derived

from the findings, showing how performative engagement, securitisation practices, and media and global influences collectively shape religious leaders' perceptions of CVE. These dynamics interact with the contested role of religious leaders, leading to low

trust and weak community engagement. The model underscores the need to shift towards community-led, transparent, and trust-based approaches to improve CVE effectiveness.

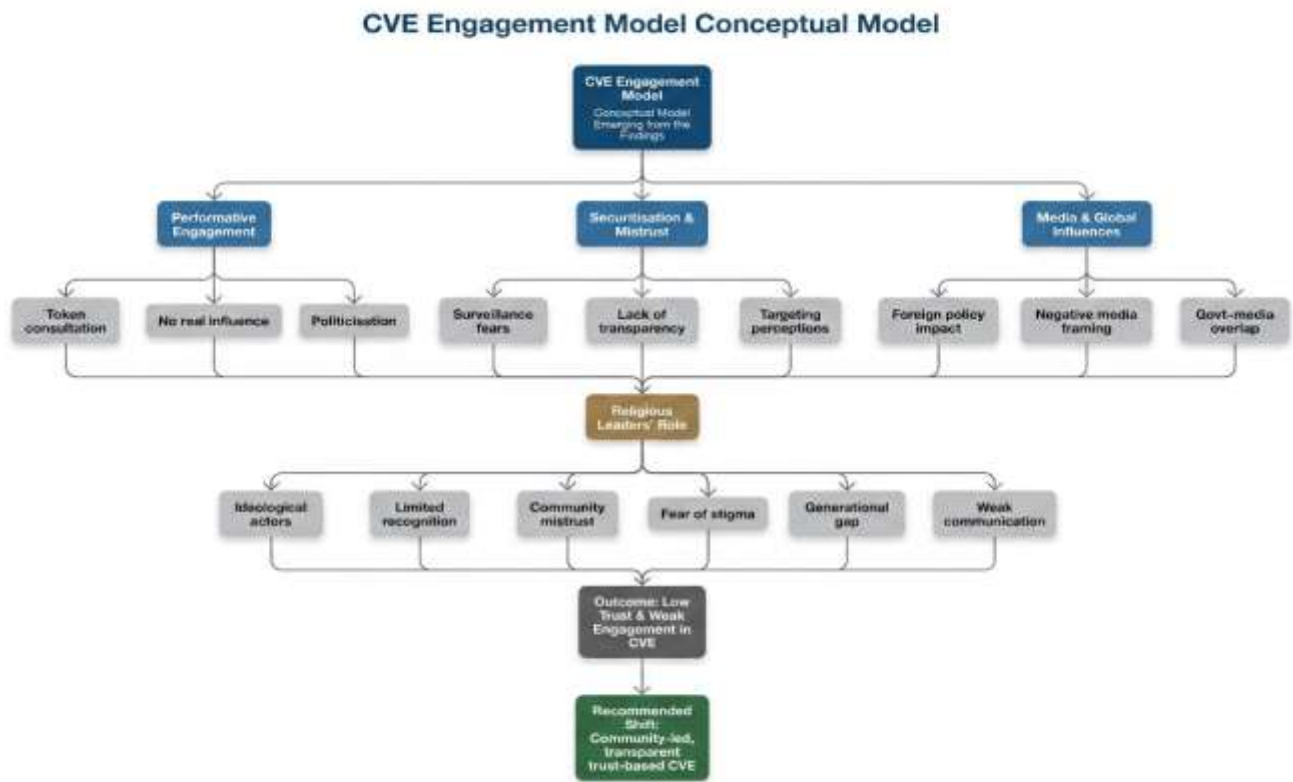


Diagram 1: Conceptual Model Emerging from the Findings.

#### 4.2. Linking Empirical Findings to the Conceptual Framework

To enhance analytical clarity, the empirical findings are mapped onto a conceptual framework integrating Procedural Justice Theory (PJT) with institutional and contextual factors shaping trust in P/CVE. The framework explains trust and engagement as outcomes of the interaction between institutional practices, external legitimacy environments, and the mediating role of religious leaders (see Figure 1).

##### 1. Institutional Practices → Procedural Justice → Trust Outcomes

The themes of performative engagement, securitisation and institutional mistrust reflect the institutional dimension of the framework.

Findings show that CVE engagement is perceived as procedurally unjust, characterised by limited participation, pre-set agendas, low transparency, and surveillance-oriented design. These conditions

undermine PJT dimensions of voice, neutrality, and respect, producing a clear pathway:

Institutional Practices → Procedural Injustice → Distrust → Disengagement

Thus, distrust emerges as a structurally produced outcome, not an attitudinal issue.

##### 2. External Factors → Legitimacy Deficit → Trust Formation

The theme of media narratives and geopolitical influences reflects the external dimension.

Perceptions of CVE are shaped by foreign policy, media representations of Islam, and political discourse linking Muslims with security concerns. These factors create a pre-existing legitimacy deficit, where inconsistencies between domestic and international policies and stigmatising narratives weaken credibility.

External Environment → Legitimacy Deficit → Distrust in CVE

This extends PJT by showing that legitimacy is

also shaped by broader socio-political contexts beyond institutional interaction.

### 3. Religious Leaders as Mediators

Religious leaders occupy a central but conditional mediating role between state institutions and Muslim communities.

Their influence is shaped by dual legitimacy pressures: institutional expectations linked to CVE and community perceptions of co-optation. Their effectiveness depends on perceived independence.

Religious Leaders ↔ Mediation → Trust / Distrust Outcomes

They can enhance trust when seen as independent, but weaken it when associated with securitised agendas.

### 4. Integrated Model

Overall, the framework illustrates a multi-layered process:

Institutional Practices + External Factors → Perceived Legitimacy → Trust/Distrust → Engagement/Disengagement

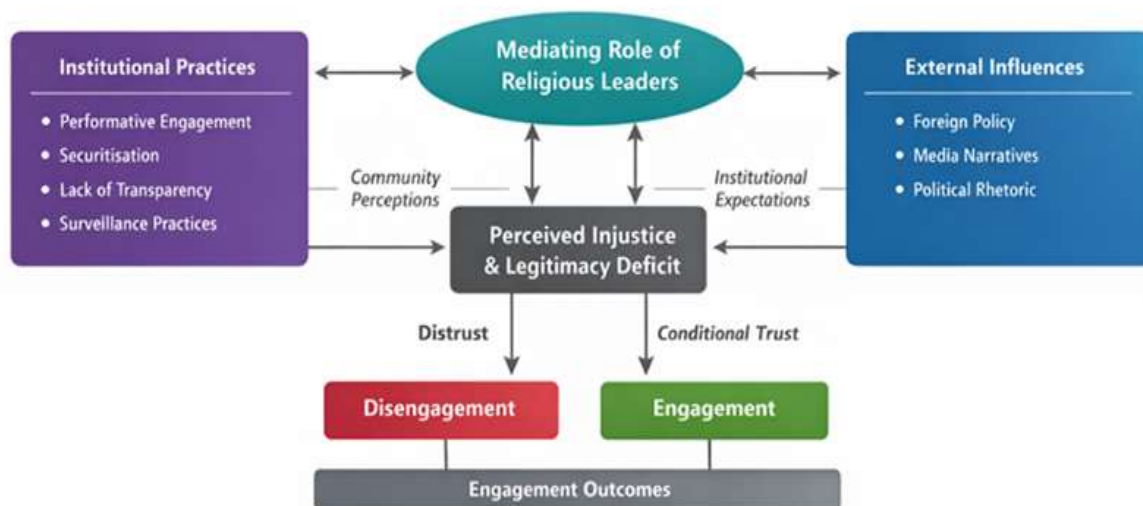
Religious leaders mediate this process but within constrained legitimacy conditions.

### 5. Theoretical Contribution

The findings extend Procedural Justice Theory in three ways:

1. From interactional to structural procedural justice
2. Inclusion of external legitimacy environments (media and foreign policy)
3. Introduction of mediated trust through religious leaders

Conceptual Framework of Trust and Engagement in CVE



## 5. DISCUSSION

Most significantly, the results show that interpersonal cooperation is insufficient to explain trust in P/CVE, but that institutional and political contexts that influence perceptions of legitimacy and security governance are important.

This study examined how religious leaders perceive government-led Countering Violent Extremism P/CVE initiatives and how these

perceptions shape trust, legitimacy, and engagement within Muslim communities. The findings demonstrate that distrust in P/CVE is primarily produced through the interaction of procedural deficiencies, securitised governance frameworks, and broader socio-political legitimacy environments. By integrating Procedural Justice Theory (PJT) with securitisation and critical CVE scholarship, this section develops a multi-layered explanation of how legitimacy in CVE is constructed, undermined, and

mediated.

### **5.1. From Procedural Justice to Structural Legitimacy**

A central contribution of this study lies in demonstrating the limits of applying Procedural Justice Theory (PJT) in its conventional, interactional form. While PJT, as developed by Tom R. Tyler, posits that perceptions of fairness, voice, and neutrality generate legitimacy and cooperation, the findings indicate that such dimensions are systematically undermined within the design of P/CVE engagement itself.

Religious leaders consistently described consultation processes as symbolic rather than substantive, characterised by pre-determined agendas and limited influence over outcomes. This suggests that procedural injustice in P/CVE is not episodic but institutionally embedded, where participation functions as a performative exercise rather than a mechanism of co-production. In this context, “voice” is present in form but absent in effect, undermining one of the core pillars of procedural legitimacy.

These findings extend PJT by shifting the analytical focus from individual encounters with authority to the structural conditions under which those encounters are organised. Trust, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a response to fair treatment, but must be analysed as an outcome of institutional design. This reframing challenges the implicit assumption within much policy discourse that improving communication or increasing consultation is sufficient to build trust.

### **5.2. Securitisation and the Reconfiguration of Engagement**

A second finding is that CVE initiatives are perceived as extensions of surveillance and intelligence practices. This finding strongly aligns with securitisation theory (Ceyhan 2002, Innes 2024, C. Jones 2022), which argues that security logics increasingly permeate social policy domains, particularly in relation to Muslim populations in Western states.

Participants’ concerns regarding funding conditions, reporting requirements, and accountability mechanisms reflect what can be understood as the institutionalisation of suspicion, where engagement is perceived as linked to surveillance and intelligence gathering.

This aligns with critical CVE scholarship, which argues that the boundaries between welfare, prevention, and security have become increasingly

blurred. (Shepherd 2018, Kundani 2015, Heath-Kelly 2023). In this context, CVE is not interpreted as a welfare or resilience-building initiative but as a mechanism of indirect monitoring.

This securitised framing has two important consequences. First, it alters the meaning of participation: engagement becomes a risk exposure rather than a trust-building opportunity. Second, it produces anticipatory disengagement, where communities distance themselves from CVE initiatives to avoid association with surveillance infrastructures. The findings therefore support and extend existing literature by demonstrating that securitisation not only shapes policy design but actively reconfigures trust relations at the community level (Al-hammadin 2025).

### **5.3. External Legitimacy Environments and the “Pre-Loaded” Trust Deficit**

The study further demonstrates that trust in P/CVE cannot be explained solely through institutional practices. Instead, it is shaped within broader external legitimacy environments, including media representations, political rhetoric, and foreign policy dynamics. This supports broader sociological and political theory that legitimacy is not only institutionally generated but also socially and symbolically constructed (Deephouse 2018, Huq 2011, W. K.-M. Charkawi 2021).

Consistent with the concept of “suspect communities” (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009), participants described how Muslim populations are positioned within public discourse as objects of risk and scrutiny. These narratives create a pre-loaded legitimacy deficit, within which government initiatives are interpreted before any direct engagement takes place.” (Turner, 2004, Breen-Smyth, 2014, Pantazis 2009).

Similarly, perceived inconsistencies between domestic inclusion policies and foreign policy actions in Muslim-majority contexts generate what can be conceptualised as a “macro-legitimacy deficit.” A macro-legitimacy deficit refers to a systemic erosion of public trust in institutional authority, where governance structures and policies are broadly perceived as unjust, exclusionary, or lacking credibility (Hough 2010).

This extends PJT by demonstrating that perceptions of fairness are filtered through external narratives and global political consciousness, particularly among communities with strong transnational identities. As a result, procedural justice at the institutional level may be insufficient to overcome distrust generated at the macro level.

#### **5.4. Religious Leaders and the Dynamics of Mediated Trust**

A key theoretical contribution of this study lies in its examination of the role of religious leaders as conditional mediators of institutional legitimacy. While policy frameworks often position religious leaders as stable “trusted intermediaries” (Cochrane 2011, Vaidyanathan 2021, C. Jones 2022), the findings demonstrate that their mediating role is highly contingent and structurally constrained.

Religious leaders operate within a dual legitimacy structure, where their authority is simultaneously evaluated by the state and their communities. This creates a condition of mediated trust, in which institutional legitimacy is not directly transmitted but is instead filtered, negotiated, and sometimes resisted by intermediary actors.

Crucially, this mediating role is highly contingent. When religious leaders are perceived as aligned with government agendas, their credibility within the community is weakened. Conversely, distancing themselves from state initiatives may preserve community trust but limit their institutional influence. This tension positions religious leaders within a hybrid legitimacy environment, where their role is inherently unstable.

These findings challenge dominant assumptions in P/CVE policy that engagement with religious leaders automatically enhances access to “hard-to-reach” communities (Linders 2018). Instead, it demonstrates that intermediary actors do not simply bridge trust gaps; they embody and redistribute legitimacy tensions, often at personal and institutional cost.

#### **5.5. Toward a Multi-Layered Model of Trust in P/CVE**

Integrating these findings, the study advances a multi-layered model of trust formation in P/CVE that moves beyond linear or interactional explanations.

At the macro level, trust is shaped by external legitimacy environments, including media narratives and foreign policy, which establish the broader conditions under which institutions are evaluated.

At the meso level, institutional practices and program design determine whether engagement is perceived as procedurally fair or securitised.

At the micro level, trust is mediated through religious leaders, whose legitimacy conditions shape how institutional intentions are interpreted within communities.

This model demonstrates that trust in P/CVE is

not a singular outcome but the product of interacting layers of governance, perception, and mediation. Importantly, it shows that reforms focused solely on improving procedural elements—such as consultation or communication—are unlikely to succeed unless they also address securitisation dynamics and broader legitimacy deficits.

#### **5.6. Implications for CVE Theory and Practice**

The findings make three key contributions to CVE scholarship.

First, they challenge the assumption that trust deficits in CVE are primarily communicative or perceptual. Instead, distrust is shown to be structurally produced through governance design.

Second, the study extends securitisation theory by demonstrating that securitised logics do not remain confined to the state but are socially internalised and reproduced at the community level, shaping participation decisions.

Third, the study advances PJT by demonstrating that legitimacy in security governance is not only procedural but also contextually and geopolitically conditioned.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that incremental reforms focused on consultation mechanisms are insufficient. Instead, meaningful trust-building requires a shift toward co-produced governance models, institutional transparency, and a clearer separation between preventive social policy and security intelligence functions. Without such structural change, CVE initiatives risk reproducing the very distrust they seek to mitigate.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study examined how Muslim religious leaders in Australia perceive and navigate government-led Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) initiatives and how these perceptions shape trust, legitimacy, and engagement within Muslim communities. Drawing on Procedural Justice Theory (PJT), the study demonstrates that trust in CVE is not merely an outcome of interpersonal communication or outreach strategies, but is structurally produced through the interaction of institutional design, securitised governance logics, and broader socio-political narratives.

The findings reveal that engagement processes are widely perceived as procedurally weak and symbolically performative, characterised by consultation without meaningful influence. Within a PJT framework, this undermines the core dimensions of procedural fairness—voice, neutrality, and respect—thereby weakening institutional legitimacy.

Furthermore, CVE initiatives are consistently interpreted through a securitised lens, where funding structures, reporting requirements, and program accountability mechanisms are associated with surveillance and intelligence-gathering practices. This perception transforms engagement from a cooperative process into a risk-laden interaction, significantly reducing community trust.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that trust in CVE cannot be explained solely through institutional encounters. Instead, it is shaped by external legitimacy environments, including media representations, political rhetoric, and foreign policy actions. These macro-level factors generate what can be understood as a "pre-loaded legitimacy deficit," in which domestic engagement efforts are filtered through pre-existing narratives of suspicion and marginalisation.

A central theoretical contribution of this study is the reconceptualisation of religious leaders as conditional mediators of procedural justice. Rather than functioning as stable bridges between the state and Muslim communities, religious leaders occupy a fragile position of dual legitimacy, where their authority is simultaneously negotiated within institutional and community spheres. Their effectiveness as mediators depends on perceived independence, credibility, and their ability to navigate securitised policy environments without

losing community trust.

Overall, this study advances Procedural Justice Theory by demonstrating that legitimacy in CVE is multi-layered and structurally embedded. It extends PJT beyond micro-level interactions to include macro-political influences and introduces the concept of mediated procedural justice, where trust is shaped through intermediary actors whose legitimacy is itself contested.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that current CVE frameworks risk undermining their own objectives by prioritising securitised engagement over genuine co-production. A shift toward transparent, community-led, and institutionally decoupled preventive strategies is required if sustainable trust and cooperation are to be achieved.

The study also underscores the need to distinguish community-based partnership activities from intelligence-driven security practices to promote trust and real engagement, thereby creating the foundation for sustainable partnerships.

In conclusion, the study highlights that distrust in CVE is not a communication failure but a structural outcome of governance design. Addressing this requires not incremental reform, but a fundamental rethinking of how legitimacy, security, and community partnership are conceptualised within counter-extremism policy.

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