Religious Tensions in Time and Space:
The 'Controversial' Interfaith Dynamics in Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesia, with its diverse religious landscape, has long been a site of interfaith interaction, where religious tensions often intersect with historical, social, and political forces. The dynamics of these interfaith relations are shaped by both time and space, with ongoing contestations surrounding the boundaries of religious practice, identity, and coexistence. This paper examines the 'controversial' nature of interfaith dynamics in Indonesia, particularly focusing on the ways religious tensions manifest across different temporal and spatial contexts. By analyzing the shifting role of religious minorities, the impact of political policies, and the influence of local cultural contexts, the paper investigates how time and space contribute to the fluidity and volatility of interfaith relations in the country. The urgency of this research lies in the growing challenges Indonesia faces in balancing its pluralistic ideals with rising

religious conservatism and exclusivism, which often escalate tensions. This study offers novel insights into the spatial and temporal dimensions of religious identity formation, showing how contested religious spaces—whether urban or rural—serve as battlegrounds for social, cultural, and political power. Furthermore, it contributes to the academic discourse on the role of religion in shaping national identity, highlighting how the intersection of historical legacies and contemporary religious practices in Indonesia creates an ongoing tension between harmony and conflict. Ultimately, this paper underscores the complexity of interfaith relations in Indonesia, offering a nuanced understanding of how time and space shape the contentious nature of religious coexistence.

Introduction

Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world, constitutionally grounded in the state ideology of Pancasila, which affirms belief in one God while accommodating multiple officially recognized religions. As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Indonesia is home not only to diverse Islamic traditions but also to significant Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian communities, alongside numerous local belief systems (Hefner, 2000). This pluralistic composition has historically produced a dynamic interplay between accommodation and contestation, where interfaith relations are shaped by negotiations between national identity, religious authority, and local cultural traditions. During the early years of independence, political leaders sought to balance Islamic aspirations with secular-nationalist principles, culminating in a constitutional compromise that avoided establishing an Islamic state (Ricklefs, 2008). This foundational settlement enabled a relatively stable framework for religious coexistence, though not without periodic tensions.

However, in recent decades, Indonesia has experienced a visible rise in religious conservatism and exclusivist interpretations of faith, influenced by global Islamic revivalist movements, democratization processes, and domestic political contestation (Bruinessen, 2013). The post-1998 Reformasi era, characterized by political

liberalization and decentralization, has created new opportunities for religious expression but also for sectarian mobilization. Local regulations inspired by religious norms, identity-based political campaigns, and public controversies over minority religious practices illustrate the increasingly complex landscape of interfaith relations (Menchik, 2016). Consequently, religious pluralism in Indonesia cannot be understood solely as a static constitutional principle; rather, it must be examined as a historically contingent and spatially differentiated phenomenon shaped by evolving political and socio-cultural forces.

The complexity of interfaith tensions in Indonesia lies in their embeddedness within temporal and spatial contexts that continually reshape religious interactions. Religious coexistence is neither uniformly harmonious nor uniformly conflictual; instead, it fluctuates across historical periods and geographical settings. Episodes of sectarian violence in regions such as Maluku and Central Sulawesi in the late 1990s and early 2000s demonstrate how political transitions and local grievances can catalyze interreligious conflict (Bertrand, 2004). Conversely, many localities maintain traditions of interfaith cooperation rooted in customary law and shared communal identities. This variability underscores the inadequacy of monolithic narratives that portray Indonesia either as a model of tolerance or as a site of inevitable religious conflict.

Moreover, political, social, and cultural contexts significantly mediate religious dynamics. Decentralization has empowered local governments to enact policies that reflect regional religious majorities, sometimes marginalizing minority groups. Simultaneously, national-level politics frequently instrumentalize religious identity during electoral competition, thereby amplifying sectarian divisions (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Cultural factors, including local adat traditions and historical patterns of migration, further complicate the picture by influencing how communities interpret and negotiate religious differences. Despite a growing body of scholarship on Indonesian pluralism, there remains a lack of nuanced analysis that systematically integrates temporal and spatial dimensions to explain how religious tensions evolve and manifest differently across contexts. Addressing this gap is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of religious coexistence and contestation in Indonesia.

This study seeks to interrogate how religious tensions manifest across different temporal and spatial contexts in Indonesia. First, it asks how historical trajectories—ranging from colonial governance and early post-independence state formation to

the Reformasi period—have shaped patterns of interfaith relations. By situating contemporary controversies within broader historical processes, the research aims to reveal continuities and transformations in the management of religious diversity. Second, the study examines how these tensions vary geographically, recognizing that interfaith dynamics in urban centers such as Jakarta may differ substantially from those in rural or conflict-prone regions. Spatial analysis enables a deeper understanding of how local governance structures, demographic compositions, and socio-economic conditions influence religious interactions.

Furthermore, the study explores the role of religious minorities within these dynamics. Minority communities often function as both agents and subjects of interfaith negotiation, navigating state regulations, social pressures, and public discourses. Their experiences illuminate broader questions about citizenship, rights, and belonging in a pluralistic nation-state (Hefner, 2011). Finally, the research investigates how political policies, historical legacies, and local cultural contexts intersect to shape religious interactions. By integrating these dimensions, the study aims to move beyond reductionist explanations and provide a multidimensional account of Indonesia's contested interfaith landscape.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the temporal and spatial dimensions of interfaith tensions in Indonesia. By tracing historical developments alongside regional variations, the study seeks to demonstrate that religious tensions are not static phenomena but are continuously reconstructed through political transitions, demographic shifts, and cultural reinterpretations. Such an approach allows for a more precise identification of the conditions under which religious coexistence becomes strained or strengthened.

A second objective is to understand the shifting role of religious minorities in Indonesia. Rather than viewing minorities solely as passive victims of discrimination, this study examines their agency in shaping public discourse, engaging in interfaith initiatives, and negotiating legal frameworks. This perspective highlights the dynamic interplay between majority and minority communities and challenges simplistic dichotomies of dominance and marginalization.

The third objective is to explore how politics and culture influence interfaith dynamics. By analyzing state policies, electoral strategies, and local customary practices, the research underscores the interconnectedness of institutional structures and everyday social interactions. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a more

integrative framework for studying religious pluralism in Indonesia, one that accounts for both structural constraints and human agency.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of religious pluralism in Indonesia by offering a temporally and spatially sensitive analysis of interfaith tensions. Existing literature often emphasizes either national-level political developments or localized case studies without fully integrating these perspectives. By bridging macro- and micro-level analyses, this research provides a more comprehensive account of how religious diversity is managed, contested, and reimagined over time and across regions.

Additionally, the study offers insights into the challenges of balancing religious harmony with rising conservatism. As debates over blasphemy laws, minority rights, and religious education continue to shape public discourse, understanding the underlying dynamics of these controversies is crucial for policymakers, civil society actors, and religious leaders (Crouch, 2014). The findings have implications not only for academic scholarship but also for practical efforts to promote social cohesion and inclusive citizenship. This the research holds relevance for discussions of national identity in a pluralistic society. Indonesia's motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), encapsulates the aspiration to reconcile diversity with unity. Yet this aspiration is continually tested by evolving political and social realities. By examining the contested nature of interfaith dynamics across time and space, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the future of pluralism, democracy, and religious coexistence in Indonesia.

Historical Foundations of Religious Tensions in Indonesia

A. Colonial Legacy and Religious Division

The historical roots of religious tensions in Indonesia cannot be disentangled from the legacies of Dutch colonial governance, which institutionalized patterns of social and religious differentiation that continue to shape interfaith dynamics. Under the administration of the Dutch East India Company and later the Dutch colonial state, populations were legally categorized into Europeans, Foreign Orientals, and Natives,

with differential rights and obligations attached to each classification (Ricklefs, 2008). Although these categories were primarily racial and administrative, they overlapped significantly with religious identities, reinforcing social boundaries between Christian Europeans, Chinese communities often associated with Confucianism or Buddhism, and the predominantly Muslim indigenous population. The colonial state adopted a strategy of indirect rule that relied on local elites, including Islamic authorities, while simultaneously restricting political expressions of Islam perceived as threatening to colonial order (Benda, 1958). This dual approach fostered a fragmented religious sphere in which cooperation and suspicion coexisted, laying structural foundations for later tensions.

Western missionary activities further complicated the religious landscape. Christian missions expanded significantly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in eastern Indonesia, where Muslim influence was less entrenched. Missionary education and social services contributed to the formation of Christian communities with distinct institutional networks and socio-political orientations (Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008). In response, Islamic reform movements such as Muhammadiyah and Persatuan Islam emerged to revitalize Islamic education and counter both syncretic practices and Christian missionary influence. These reformist currents were influenced by transnational Islamic thought and sought to purify religious practice while strengthening communal solidarity (Noer, 1973). The resulting dynamic was not merely theological but socio-political: religious affiliation became increasingly intertwined with questions of modernity, education, and access to colonial resources. Thus, colonial policies and religious activism together produced differentiated religious publics whose interactions were marked by both competition and negotiation, shaping patterns of division that extended into the postcolonial era.

B. Post-Independence Religious Politics

The proclamation of Indonesian independence in 1945 marked a decisive moment in the reconfiguration of religion-state relations. The founders of the republic faced the challenge of reconciling Islamic aspirations for a state grounded explicitly in sharia with nationalist visions of a pluralistic polity. The resulting compromise was embodied in Pancasila, which affirmed belief in one supreme God without

privileging a particular religion (Hefner, 2000). The removal of the "Jakarta Charter" clause that would have mandated Islamic law for Muslims symbolized the delicate balance between religious and secular-nationalist forces. Nevertheless, debates over the role of Islam in public life persisted, revealing unresolved tensions between constitutional inclusivity and majoritarian expectations.

During the New Order regime (1966–1998), the state under Suharto adopted a corporatist approach to religion, promoting stability through tight regulation of religious organizations while simultaneously encouraging public expressions of religiosity as markers of moral citizenship (Crouch, 2014). Religious affiliation became mandatory on identity cards, effectively marginalizing adherents of indigenous belief systems and reinforcing binary distinctions between recognized and unrecognized faiths. Although the regime suppressed overt sectarian conflict, it did not eliminate underlying grievances. Instead, tensions were often displaced into bureaucratic disputes over church construction, blasphemy accusations, and proselytization. The Reformasi era that followed democratization introduced greater freedoms but also intensified identity politics, as religious groups mobilized within newly competitive electoral arenas (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Consequently, post-independence religious politics have oscillated between accommodation and contestation, reflecting the ongoing struggle to define the boundaries of religious authority and national identity within a formally pluralist framework.

C. *The Role of Religious Minorities in Indonesian Society*

Religious minorities have occupied complex and evolving positions within Indonesian society, shaped by regional demographics, political regimes, and socio-economic structures. Christian communities, concentrated in regions such as North Sulawesi, Papua, and parts of eastern Indonesia, have historically benefited from missionary education and colonial administrative roles, which sometimes fostered perceptions of privilege among Muslim majorities (Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008). Hinduism in Bali developed as both a religious and cultural identity deeply intertwined with local adat traditions, receiving state recognition in a manner that preserved regional distinctiveness while integrating it into the national framework. Buddhist and Confucian communities, often associated with ethnic Chinese Indonesians, experienced fluctuating recognition, particularly during periods of anti-

Chinese sentiment when cultural and religious expressions were restricted (Menchik, 2016). These historical trajectories illustrate that minority status in Indonesia is neither uniform nor static but mediated by intersections of ethnicity, geography, and political power.

Periods of political instability have frequently intensified the vulnerabilities of religious minorities. The communal conflicts in Maluku and Central Sulawesi during the late 1990s exposed Christian and Muslim populations alike to violence, displacement, and militarization, revealing how rapidly intercommunal relations can deteriorate under conditions of weak state authority (Bertrand, 2004). Similarly, minority Islamic sects such as Ahmadiyah and Shia communities have faced discrimination and legal challenges, often justified through blasphemy laws or local regulations. These experiences underscore the fragility of minority protections within decentralized governance structures. Yet minorities have also demonstrated resilience through interfaith initiatives, legal advocacy, and participation in civil society networks that promote pluralism (Hefner, 2011). Their engagement highlights the dual role of minorities as both subjects of tension and active contributors to Indonesia's evolving discourse on religious coexistence. By examining these historical and contemporary dynamics, it becomes evident that the position of religious minorities is central to understanding the broader architecture of interfaith relations in Indonesia.

Temporal Dynamics of Interfaith Tensions

A. Interfaith Relations During the New Order (1966–1998)

Interfaith relations during the New Order era were profoundly shaped by the authoritarian governance of Suharto, whose regime prioritized political stability and national unity above pluralistic deliberation. The state institutionalized a framework of "religious harmony" (*kerukunan umat beragama*) that sought to regulate interactions among officially recognized religions through bureaucratic oversight and controlled dialogue forums. This model was premised on the assumption that religious difference constituted a potential threat to national cohesion and therefore required firm state management (Hefner, 2000). Religious organizations were incorporated into corporatist structures, limiting their autonomy while granting

them space to operate within defined parameters. While this approach succeeded in suppressing large-scale sectarian violence for much of the period, it did not eliminate underlying grievances. Instead, tensions were often displaced into administrative disputes, particularly regarding the construction of houses of worship and allegations of proselytization, which were mediated through state-controlled mechanisms (Crouch, 2014).

The New Order's emphasis on ideological conformity further complicated religious freedom. All social and political organizations were required to adopt Pancasila as their sole foundation, effectively depoliticizing overtly Islamist agendas while simultaneously embedding religiosity within state discourse. The paradox of this system lay in its simultaneous promotion and restriction of religion: citizens were required to adhere to one of the recognized religions, yet expressions deemed politically subversive were curtailed. Minority groups and unrecognized belief systems faced structural marginalization, as their identities did not fit neatly within the state's administrative categories (Menchik, 2016). Consequently, the New Order period can be characterized as one of controlled pluralism, where interfaith harmony was maintained through surveillance and regulation rather than through robust protections of religious liberty. The temporal legacy of this approach would later shape the trajectory of religious tensions in the democratic era.

B. Post-Reformation (1998–Present)

The collapse of the New Order regime in 1998 initiated a period of democratic transition known as Reformasi, fundamentally transforming the landscape of religious expression and political participation. Democratization expanded civil liberties, enabling religious groups to mobilize more freely within public and political spheres. This newfound openness, however, also exposed latent sectarian divisions that had been suppressed under authoritarian rule. Communal conflicts in regions such as Maluku and Central Sulawesi in the late 1990s illustrated how weakened state authority, economic dislocation, and identity-based mobilization could converge to produce violent interreligious confrontations (Bertrand, 2004). The temporal shift from authoritarian stability to democratic competition thus revealed the fragility of interfaith relations when mediated by rapid institutional change.

In the decades that followed, Indonesia witnessed the simultaneous consolidation of democratic institutions and the rise of religious conservatism. Decentralization policies empowered local governments to enact bylaws reflecting dominant religious norms, sometimes at the expense of minority rights (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Public controversies surrounding blasphemy cases, church closures, and the activities of minority Islamic sects underscored the growing salience of religious identity in political contestation. The mobilization against Jakarta's former governor in 2016–2017, framed around allegations of blasphemy, exemplified how religious symbolism could be leveraged within electoral politics to galvanize mass support. While democratic frameworks have provided avenues for legal redress and civil society advocacy, they have also facilitated populist appeals grounded in religious exclusivism. The post-Reformasi era therefore embodies a paradox: expanded freedoms coexist with intensified identity politics, producing a dynamic yet volatile interfaith environment.

C. The Role of Religion in Shaping National Identity

Religion has long occupied a central place in the construction of Indonesian national identity, functioning both as a unifying principle and as a site of contestation. The ideological foundation of Pancasila affirms belief in one supreme God while upholding pluralism, encapsulated in the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). This formulation seeks to reconcile the archipelago's religious heterogeneity with a cohesive national narrative (Hefner, 2011). However, the balance between inclusivity and majoritarian sentiment has remained delicate. Periodic calls to strengthen the role of Islamic law or to privilege particular religious interpretations reveal ongoing debates about the normative content of Indonesian citizenship.

In contemporary politics, religious symbolism increasingly permeates public discourse, campaign strategies, and policy debates. Political actors frequently invoke religious credentials to establish moral authority, reflecting broader societal expectations that link piety with leadership legitimacy. Such developments highlight the tension between Indonesia's pluralistic ideals and the rise of exclusivist discourses that seek clearer boundaries between religious communities. As Menchik (2016) argues, Indonesia's model of "tolerance without liberalism" reflects a communitarian

understanding of religious harmony that prioritizes group recognition over individual autonomy. The temporal evolution of national identity thus reveals a continuous negotiation between constitutional pluralism and sociopolitical pressures for religious homogeneity. Understanding this interplay is essential for analyzing how interfaith tensions are embedded not only in specific events but also in the broader project of nation-building itself.

Spatial Dynamics of Interfaith Tensions

A. Urban vs. Rural Religious Practices

Spatial differentiation constitutes a critical analytical lens for understanding the configuration of interfaith tensions in Indonesia. Urban and rural settings provide distinct socio-political environments within which religious identities are constructed, negotiated, and contested. Urbanization has accelerated significantly since the late twentieth century, producing metropolitan centers characterized by demographic heterogeneity, economic stratification, and intensified public visibility of religion. In these contexts, religious pluralism is not merely a constitutional principle but an everyday social reality, enacted through workplace interactions, educational institutions, and civic associations (Hefner, 2000). The density and diversity of urban life can foster pragmatic tolerance, yet they can also sharpen identity boundaries as communities seek to maintain coherence amid rapid change. Consequently, urban space functions simultaneously as a site of accommodation and competition.

Major metropolitan areas such as Jakarta and Surabaya illustrate how urban pluralism produces layered religious dynamics. Jakarta, as the political and economic center of the country, hosts a concentration of national religious organizations, advocacy networks, and media platforms that amplify local disputes into national controversies. Electoral mobilization frequently incorporates religious symbolism, demonstrating how urban arenas can transform theological differences into political capital (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Surabaya, by contrast, has often been cited for relatively stable interfaith relations, supported by local leadership initiatives and interreligious dialogue forums. These examples underscore that urban diversity does

not yield uniform outcomes; rather, it interacts with local governance styles, civil society engagement, and historical trajectories.

Urban religiosity in Indonesia also challenges the classical secularization thesis. Instead of diminishing religious commitment, modernization has often stimulated new forms of piety expressed through Islamic study groups, Christian charismatic movements, and interfaith activism (Bruinessen, 2013). Middle-class expansion in cities has facilitated the growth of faith-based educational institutions and philanthropic organizations, embedding religion within modern organizational frameworks. Such developments reveal the coexistence of cosmopolitan lifestyles and conservative moral discourses. As Menchik (2016) argues, Indonesia's pluralism is communitarian rather than liberal, emphasizing group recognition over individual autonomy. In urban contexts, this model can enable peaceful coexistence while simultaneously constraining minority practices perceived as disruptive to communal harmony.

In rural settings, religious practice is frequently interwoven with kinship structures, agricultural economies, and customary authority. Demographic homogeneity may reinforce dominant religious interpretations, particularly when religious leaders hold significant social influence. Decentralization policies introduced after 1998 have empowered district-level authorities to enact regulations reflecting local majorities, sometimes restricting minority expressions (Buehler, 2016). However, rural conservatism should not be overstated. Many villages sustain traditions of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) that transcend doctrinal divides, rooted in shared economic interdependence and local customs (Ricklefs, 2008). These practices illustrate that tolerance in rural areas often derives from pragmatic solidarity rather than abstract liberal principles.

Moreover, patterns of migration complicate the rural–urban distinction. Transmigration programs during the New Order redistributed populations across islands, altering local religious demographics and occasionally generating tension between migrants and indigenous communities (Bertrand, 2004). In some areas, demographic shifts intensified perceptions of cultural encroachment, while in others they fostered new forms of hybrid identity. Thus, spatial dynamics cannot be reduced to static categories; they are shaped by mobility, economic development, and administrative restructuring.

Ultimately, the contrast between urban and rural religious practices reveals differentiated but interconnected arenas of interfaith negotiation. Urban centers may

magnify disputes through media and political competition, whereas rural areas often mediate tensions through customary mechanisms. Both settings demonstrate that spatial context fundamentally influences how religious difference is interpreted and managed. Understanding these variations is essential for a comprehensive analysis of Indonesia's evolving interfaith landscape.

B. Local Cultural Contexts and Religious Identity

Local cultural traditions significantly mediate the articulation of religious identity in Indonesia, where global faiths have historically encountered diverse indigenous cosmologies. The concept of *adat*—customary law and tradition—remains central to communal organization in many regions, shaping moral expectations and dispute resolution processes (Bowen, 2003). Rather than existing in opposition to religion, *adat* frequently operates as a complementary framework through which religious teachings are interpreted and localized. This interplay produces regionally distinct expressions of faith, underscoring that Indonesian religiosity is embedded in layered historical and cultural contexts.

In Bali, Hinduism constitutes both a religious and cultural identity, institutionalized through temple networks and ritual calendars that structure social life. The state's recognition of Balinese Hinduism as one of the official religions facilitated its integration into the national framework while preserving regional specificity (Hefner, 2011). In Java, by contrast, Islamic identity has historically encompassed a spectrum ranging from syncretic traditions to reformist orthodoxy. Reform movements in the twentieth century sought to purify local practices, challenging rituals deemed inconsistent with scriptural interpretations (Noer, 1973). These internal debates illustrate how local culture can serve as both a bridge and a battleground in the negotiation of religious authenticity.

Regional variations in tolerance often reflect these cultural configurations. In North Sulawesi, long-standing Christian majorities coexist with Muslim minorities within institutionalized interfaith forums that emphasize mutual respect. Conversely, in regions affected by communal conflict, such as Maluku, religious identity has intersected with ethnic and economic competition, amplifying polarization (Bertrand, 2004). Post-conflict reconciliation efforts frequently invoke shared

cultural narratives to rebuild trust, demonstrating the capacity of local tradition to mitigate sectarian division.

Menchik (2016) conceptualizes Indonesian pluralism as "godly nationalism," wherein religious communities are recognized as collective entities contributing to national cohesion. This framework privileges intergroup harmony but may marginalize individuals or sects whose beliefs fall outside recognized categories. The Ahmadiyah and Shia communities, for example, have encountered resistance in regions where local authorities interpret orthodoxy narrowly (Crouch, 2014). Acceptance, therefore, is contingent upon conformity to dominant communal norms, revealing the conditional nature of tolerance.

Cultural festivals, shared rituals, and interfaith dialogue initiatives illustrate alternative trajectories. In some localities, communal celebrations incorporate multiple religious groups, reinforcing shared belonging despite doctrinal differences. Civil society organizations and local leaders often draw upon *adat* to legitimize inclusive practices, framing tolerance as an indigenous value rather than an imported liberal concept (Hefner, 2000). Such strategies highlight the importance of cultural translation in sustaining pluralism.

Thus, local cultural contexts shape the contours of religious identity and interfaith interaction in profound ways. They determine whether religious difference is framed as enrichment or threat, cooperation or competition. By situating religious dynamics within specific cultural milieus, scholars can better understand the spatial heterogeneity of tolerance and conflict across Indonesia.

C. Contested Religious Spaces

Religious spaces in Indonesia constitute tangible expressions of communal identity and authority, rendering them focal points of interfaith tension. Houses of worship symbolize not only spiritual devotion but also demographic presence and political recognition. Consequently, disputes over the establishment or expansion of such spaces often reflect broader anxieties about shifting power relations. Regulatory frameworks, including joint ministerial decrees governing house-of-worship construction, require evidence of local support, embedding communal consent within administrative processes (Crouch, 2014). While designed to maintain harmony, these procedures can empower majorities to impede minority initiatives.

Conflicts over church construction in West Java and mosque expansion in mixed neighborhoods illustrate how spatial claims intersect with legal interpretation and grassroots mobilization. In several cases, local opposition has invoked concerns about proselytization or social disruption, framing resistance as defense of communal stability (Hefner, 2011). These disputes frequently escalate through media coverage and involvement of national advocacy groups, transforming local zoning issues into symbols of broader ideological struggle.

Urban peripheries experiencing rapid migration are particularly susceptible to spatial contestation. Demographic change may alter perceived religious balances, prompting heightened scrutiny of new religious infrastructure. Transmigration legacies further complicate land ownership patterns and historical claims, intensifying competition over sacred and communal sites (Bertrand, 2004). Such conflicts demonstrate that spatial tensions are rarely purely theological; they are embedded in socioeconomic and historical contexts.

Cemeteries, pilgrimage routes, and public squares also function as contested religious spaces. Access to burial grounds or the right to conduct public religious events can become flashpoints for intercommunal disagreement. These disputes reveal how spatial regulation shapes everyday religious practice, influencing visibility and legitimacy. Buehler (2016) notes that local bylaws inspired by religious norms sometimes extend into public morality regulations, affecting gender relations and minority expression in shared spaces.

Despite these challenges, contested spaces can also become arenas of negotiation and reconciliation. Interfaith mediation efforts, often supported by civil society coalitions, seek to reframe disputes as administrative rather than existential conflicts. Successful resolutions typically involve dialogue, compromise, and appeals to constitutional principles of equality (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Such processes underscore the dynamic interplay between law, community sentiment, and political leadership. In sum, religious spaces materialize the spatial dimensions of interfaith tension, transforming abstract identity claims into concrete territorial negotiations. They reveal how pluralism is enacted within physical landscapes shaped by regulation, migration, and historical memory. Analyzing these contested arenas deepens understanding of how power, recognition, and belonging are spatially organized in Indonesia's plural society.

Political Influence on Religious Tensions

A. State Policies and Religious Minorities

The Indonesian state has played a central and ambivalent role in managing religious diversity, oscillating between accommodation, regulation, and restriction. Constitutionally, the state is founded upon Pancasila, which affirms belief in one supreme God while refraining from establishing a theocratic framework. In practice, however, the state recognizes a limited number of official religions and administers religious life through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, thereby institutionalizing a bureaucratic model of pluralism (Hefner, 2000). This administrative recognition has historically structured access to civil rights, including marriage registration, identity documentation, and public worship. Consequently, state policy has not merely mediated religious tensions but actively shaped the categories through which religious communities are defined and governed.

Religious minorities have often experienced the regulatory dimension of this framework most acutely. The requirement to affiliate with a recognized religion marginalized adherents of indigenous belief systems for decades, although recent Constitutional Court decisions have improved formal recognition of *aliran kepercayaan* (Crouch, 2014). Similarly, minority Islamic sects such as Ahmadiyah have faced legal and social pressures justified through blasphemy provisions and ministerial decrees restricting their activities (Menchik, 2016). The 1965 Blasphemy Law, upheld by the Constitutional Court in 2010, remains a pivotal instrument through which doctrinal boundaries are policed, often reflecting majoritarian interpretations of orthodoxy. These policies demonstrate that the state's commitment to harmony frequently prioritizes public order over expansive protections of individual religious freedom.

At the same time, the government has periodically sponsored interfaith dialogue forums and national campaigns promoting tolerance, reflecting awareness of the fragility of social cohesion. Institutions such as the Forum for Religious Harmony (*Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama*, FKUB) operate at provincial and district levels to mediate disputes over houses of worship and communal conflict. While such mechanisms can facilitate negotiation, critics argue that they embed majority dominance within decision-making structures, particularly in regions where

demographic imbalances are pronounced (Buehler, 2016). Thus, state management of religious diversity embodies a structural paradox: policies intended to preserve harmony may inadvertently institutionalize inequality.

Political transitions have further influenced minority protections. During the authoritarian era of Suharto, religious expression was tightly controlled, limiting overt sectarian mobilization but constraining civic freedoms. The post-1998 democratic transition expanded space for advocacy and judicial review, enabling minority groups to challenge discriminatory regulations (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Nevertheless, decentralization transferred significant authority to local governments, producing uneven enforcement of constitutional guarantees across regions. The lived experience of minority citizenship therefore varies spatially and temporally, underscoring the intricate relationship between national policy and local implementation.

In sum, state policies constitute a foundational dimension of religious tension in Indonesia. By defining legitimate religion, regulating public worship, and adjudicating doctrinal disputes, the government shapes the contours of interfaith relations. The challenge lies in reconciling communitarian notions of harmony with evolving norms of human rights and democratic accountability. Understanding this tension is essential for assessing the broader political architecture within which religious minorities navigate inclusion and exclusion.

B. The Rise of Political Islam

The rise of political Islam in Indonesia represents a significant transformation in the relationship between religion and public authority. Although Islamic organizations have long influenced social and educational life, their formal political engagement has fluctuated across regimes. During the early post-independence period, Islamic parties advocated for a stronger constitutional role for sharia, yet their influence was curtailed under Guided Democracy and subsequently marginalized during the New Order (Ricklefs, 2008). The democratic opening of Reformasi reconfigured this landscape, enabling Islamic political movements to reassert themselves within competitive electoral politics.

Contemporary political Islam in Indonesia is heterogeneous, encompassing mainstream organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah alongside

more conservative advocacy groups. While the former often promote pluralist interpretations compatible with Pancasila, the latter have mobilized mass demonstrations around issues of blasphemy and moral governance (Bruinessen, 2013). The 2016–2017 mobilizations in Jakarta, framed around allegations of blasphemy against a Christian governor, demonstrated the capacity of Islamist coalitions to influence electoral outcomes and national discourse. Such episodes reveal how religious narratives can be instrumentalized to consolidate political support, particularly in urban settings where media amplification intensifies symbolic resonance.

Religious political parties have also shaped legislative debates concerning morality laws, education policy, and regional autonomy. Although no single Islamic party has dominated national elections, coalition politics grants them leverage in parliamentary negotiations (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Their influence has contributed to the proliferation of local bylaws inspired by Islamic norms, reflecting the interaction between national pluralism and local majoritarianism. Critics argue that this dynamic risks normalizing exclusivist interpretations of citizenship, while proponents contend that it reflects democratic responsiveness to societal values.

Importantly, the rise of political Islam does not necessarily equate to rejection of democracy. As Hefner (2000) observes, many Indonesian Muslim intellectuals articulate visions of "civil Islam" that reconcile faith with democratic participation. Nonetheless, the coexistence of pluralist and exclusivist strands within political Islam generates ongoing tension in interfaith relations. Political contestation grounded in religious symbolism can exacerbate polarization, particularly when doctrinal disputes are reframed as existential threats to national identity.

Therefore, political Islam's contemporary prominence must be understood as both a product of democratization and a driver of evolving religious discourse. Its impact on interfaith relations depends on whether religious mobilization reinforces inclusive nationalism or amplifies sectarian boundaries. This ambivalence underscores the necessity of examining political Islam within broader institutional and cultural contexts rather than treating it as a monolithic phenomenon.

C. Religious Laws and Local Governance

Decentralization after 1998 significantly expanded the authority of local governments, enabling them to legislate in areas previously controlled by the central state. This restructuring has had profound implications for the implementation of religious norms. In several districts, local administrations have enacted regulations addressing dress codes, alcohol consumption, and public morality, often justified as reflections of community values (Buehler, 2016). While framed as democratic expressions of local autonomy, such bylaws have generated debate regarding their compatibility with constitutional guarantees of religious freedom.

The most prominent example of regional religious legislation is found in Aceh, which was granted special autonomy allowing the formal implementation of aspects of sharia law. Following the 2005 peace agreement between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement, Aceh institutionalized Islamic criminal bylaws regulating conduct such as gambling, alcohol consumption, and khalwat (unmarried cohabitation). Supporters argue that these measures reflect Aceh's historical Islamic identity and contribute to moral order, while critics raise concerns about gender discrimination and minority rights (Crouch, 2014). Aceh thus represents a distinctive but symbolically powerful case in national debates over the scope of religious law.

Local governance structures also influence the enforcement of regulations affecting minority worship. The requirement for community approval in constructing houses of worship places substantial discretion in the hands of district officials and interfaith forums. In regions where political leaders adopt conciliatory approaches, disputes may be resolved through negotiation; elsewhere, administrative inertia or partisan alignment can entrench exclusion (Menchik, 2016). The variability of enforcement illustrates how decentralization produces differentiated experiences of citizenship across Indonesia's archipelago.

Moreover, local elections incentivize candidates to signal religious credentials, particularly in areas where conservative constituencies hold electoral sway. This dynamic may encourage symbolic legislation aimed at demonstrating piety rather than addressing substantive socioeconomic concerns (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Over time, such patterns risk embedding religious norms within bureaucratic routines, normalizing regulatory interventions in personal and communal life.

In conclusion, religious laws and local governance structures constitute pivotal arenas in which political authority intersects with doctrinal interpretation. The implementation of sharia-inspired regulations, especially in Aceh, exemplifies the spatial differentiation of legal pluralism within a formally unitary state. By examining these developments, it becomes evident that interfaith tensions in Indonesia are not solely the product of theological divergence but are deeply embedded in political institutions and regulatory practices that define the boundaries of legitimate belief and behavior.

Case Studies of Interfaith Tensions

A. Case Study: The Ambon Conflict (1999–2002)

The communal violence that erupted in Ambon, the capital of Maluku Province, between 1999 and 2002 represents one of the most devastating episodes of interfaith conflict in post-authoritarian Indonesia. The conflict, often referred to as the Maluku or Ambon conflict, involved large-scale violence between Muslim and Christian communities, resulting in thousands of deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents (Bertrand, 2004). Although the immediate trigger was a relatively minor altercation in January 1999, the escalation into protracted sectarian warfare reflected deeper structural tensions embedded in demographic shifts, economic competition, and political uncertainty following the fall of President Suharto. The rapid weakening of centralized authority during the early Reformasi period created a security vacuum in which rumors, militia mobilization, and retaliatory attacks proliferated.

Historical grievances played a central role in shaping the trajectory of violence. During the colonial era, Christians in Maluku had enjoyed disproportionate access to education and civil service positions, fostering perceptions of privilege among segments of the Muslim population (Bertrand, 2004). Under the New Order, transmigration and administrative restructuring altered local demographics and patterns of political representation, intensifying competition over state resources. These transformations reconfigured communal balances, rendering religious identity increasingly salient in struggles for bureaucratic and economic power. As political

decentralization unfolded after 1998, local elites capitalized on communal narratives to consolidate support, often framing disputes in explicitly religious terms.

The conflict was further exacerbated by the involvement of armed militias, including external actors who framed the violence as a broader defense of Islamic or Christian communities. The circulation of inflammatory media and the mobilization of paramilitary groups deepened polarization, transforming localized clashes into organized sectarian warfare (Hefner, 2000). The eventual resolution, facilitated by the 2002 Malino II Agreement, underscored the importance of state mediation and interfaith dialogue in restoring stability. However, the social scars of displacement and segregation persisted, reshaping patterns of residential settlement and communal interaction.

The Ambon conflict illustrates how temporal political transitions and spatial demographic dynamics intersect to produce acute religious violence. It demonstrates that interfaith tensions rarely emerge solely from theological differences; rather, they are catalyzed by institutional fragility, economic rivalry, and elite manipulation. As such, Ambon serves as a paradigmatic case for understanding the contingent nature of religious conflict in Indonesia's democratizing context.

B. Case Study: Religious Intolerance in Java and Bali

While large-scale violence has subsided since the early 2000s, patterns of religious intolerance persist in several regions, including parts of Java and Bali. Java, Indonesia's most populous island, is religiously diverse, encompassing Muslim majorities alongside significant Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian minorities. In provinces such as West Java, disputes over church construction permits and accusations of blasphemy have generated recurrent tensions (Crouch, 2014). These controversies often revolve around administrative requirements mandating community approval for houses of worship, which can be mobilized by local majorities to obstruct minority religious expression. The result is a bureaucratized form of contestation in which legal procedures become instruments of social exclusion.

The dynamics in Java also reflect the influence of conservative Islamic organizations advocating stricter interpretations of orthodoxy. Public protests and legal campaigns targeting minority sects, including Ahmadiyah communities, reveal

the interplay between grassroots mobilization and local governance structures (Menchik, 2016). Although Indonesia's constitutional framework guarantees freedom of religion, enforcement remains uneven across districts, producing a patchwork of tolerance and restriction. Such variability underscores the spatial fragmentation of religious rights within the decentralized state.

In Bali, tensions assume a different configuration. As a Hindu-majority province within a predominantly Muslim country, Bali's religious identity is deeply intertwined with cultural heritage and tourism. The preservation of Balinese Hindu traditions has been supported by both local authorities and national recognition of Hinduism as an official religion (Hefner, 2011). Nevertheless, migration from other parts of Indonesia has diversified Bali's demographic composition, occasionally generating friction over land use, mosque construction, and public religious expression. Unlike the overt sectarian violence observed in Ambon, tensions in Bali often manifest through debates about cultural preservation and spatial regulation.

These cases illustrate that religious intolerance in Java and Bali operates through distinct mechanisms shaped by regional history and demography. In Java, bureaucratic regulation and activist mobilization dominate; in Bali, concerns about cultural continuity and demographic change shape discourse. Both contexts reveal that interfaith tension need not escalate into violence to exert significant social and political consequences. Rather, subtle forms of exclusion and administrative obstruction can gradually redefine the boundaries of acceptable religious practice.

C. Case Study: Shifting Identities and Practices in Aceh

The province of Aceh presents a unique case in the study of interfaith tensions due to its special autonomous status and formal implementation of aspects of sharia law. Following decades of separatist conflict between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), the 2005 Helsinki peace agreement granted Aceh authority to enact Islamic legal regulations. This arrangement institutionalized religious courts and bylaws addressing moral conduct, dress codes, and criminal offenses (Buehler, 2016). While proponents frame these measures as an expression of Acehnese identity and historical Islamic heritage, critics question their implications for minority communities and gender equality.

The imposition of sharia in Aceh has redefined public space and civic norms. Public caning for certain offenses, enforcement of modest dress requirements, and restrictions on alcohol consumption exemplify the visible entrenchment of Islamic legal symbolism. For the Muslim majority, these regulations may reinforce communal cohesion and moral order. For non-Muslim minorities, however, the expansion of religious regulation can generate uncertainty regarding equal protection under national law (Crouch, 2014). Although non-Muslims are formally exempt from certain provisions, the broader sociopolitical environment shaped by sharia influences everyday interactions and perceptions of belonging.

Moreover, the Aceh case demonstrates how religious identity can shift from a marker of resistance against central authority to an institutionalized component of regional governance. During the separatist conflict, Islamic symbolism functioned partly as a mobilizing discourse against perceived marginalization by Jakarta. In the post-conflict period, it has become embedded within bureaucratic structures, altering power relations between religious leaders, local politicians, and civil society actors (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). This institutionalization creates new sites of contestation, particularly when interpretations of sharia diverge or when enforcement practices provoke public criticism.

Aceh thus exemplifies the complex interplay between autonomy, religion, and minority rights within Indonesia's decentralized framework. It illustrates how spatial differentiation in legal authority can produce distinct models of religious governance within a single nation-state. By examining Aceh alongside Ambon and Java–Bali, it becomes evident that interfaith tensions in Indonesia manifest through diverse pathways, shaped by historical memory, demographic transformation, and political restructuring. Collectively, these case studies highlight the necessity of contextual analysis in understanding the evolving landscape of religious coexistence and conflict.

The Role of Religion in Nation-Building

A. Religion as a Unifying Force

Religion has occupied a foundational position in the Indonesian nation-building project, functioning as a moral and symbolic anchor in the construction of collective identity. Unlike secular nationalist models that marginalize religion from public life,

Indonesia institutionalized belief in one supreme God as the first principle of Pancasila, thereby embedding religiosity within the constitutional order (Hefner, 2000). This formulation enabled the state to acknowledge the centrality of faith in social life while avoiding the establishment of a single official religion. The national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), reinforces this synthesis by affirming pluralism as an intrinsic element of Indonesian identity. In this framework, religion is not antithetical to national unity but a constitutive component of it.

National symbols and rituals further illustrate the integrative function of religion. Public ceremonies, educational curricula, and state-sponsored commemorations routinely incorporate multi-religious prayers and representations, signaling formal recognition of diverse faith communities. Institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs were established shortly after independence to ensure that religious groups would be incorporated into state structures rather than positioned as adversaries (Ricklefs, 2008). Through these mechanisms, religion became intertwined with citizenship, reinforcing a shared moral vocabulary that transcends ethnic and regional divisions.

Religious tolerance has likewise been framed as a civic virtue essential to social cohesion. Interfaith dialogue initiatives, often supported by major Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, promote narratives of coexistence grounded in theological pluralism and mutual respect (Hefner, 2011). These movements articulate an understanding of Islam compatible with democracy and multiculturalism, sometimes described as "civil Islam," which situates religious commitment within a broader commitment to constitutional order (Hefner, 2000). Such interpretations contribute to the stabilization of interfaith relations by framing tolerance as both a religious and national obligation.

Moreover, during periods of crisis—including natural disasters and political transitions—religious organizations have played crucial roles in humanitarian relief and social mediation. Their extensive grassroots networks enable rapid mobilization, reinforcing perceptions of religion as a source of solidarity and moral guidance. This capacity strengthens the integrative dimension of religion in public life, demonstrating its practical contribution to national resilience.

Nevertheless, the unifying function of religion depends upon the maintenance of inclusive narratives that accommodate diversity. When state institutions successfully balance recognition with equality, religion can reinforce a shared sense of belonging across Indonesia's heterogeneous archipelago. Thus, religion's integrative

capacity lies not in doctrinal uniformity but in its ability to provide a moral framework compatible with pluralism and democratic governance.

B. Religion as a Divisive Force

Despite its integrative potential, religion has also functioned as a divisive force within Indonesia's nation-building trajectory. The rise of religious conservatism in the post-Reformasi era has introduced new challenges to national cohesion, particularly when exclusivist interpretations of faith contest pluralist principles. Conservative movements have mobilized around issues such as blasphemy, moral regulation, and minority sects, often framing their activism as defense of religious authenticity (Bruinessen, 2013). While such mobilization reflects democratic freedoms, it can exacerbate polarization when political competition amplifies sectarian narratives.

Religiously motivated violence, though less widespread than during the early 2000s, continues to shape public discourse. Incidents targeting minority communities, including attacks on houses of worship or accusations of heresy, reveal the persistence of localized intolerance (Menchik, 2016). These episodes are frequently embedded within broader struggles over authority, representation, and moral legitimacy. As Bertrand (2004) demonstrates in his analysis of communal conflicts, sectarian violence often emerges from the convergence of institutional fragility and elite manipulation rather than purely theological antagonism. Nevertheless, once mobilized, religious identity can serve as a powerful boundary marker that intensifies social fragmentation.

Societal polarization is further reinforced by digital media environments that facilitate the rapid dissemination of inflammatory rhetoric. Online platforms have enabled the circulation of religiously charged narratives that may outpace institutional mechanisms for mediation. In electoral contexts, political actors sometimes instrumentalize religious symbolism to consolidate support, blurring the line between legitimate democratic expression and divisive populism (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Such developments underscore the vulnerability of pluralist nation-building to identity-based mobilization.

The divisive potential of religion thus resides not solely in doctrinal difference but in its entanglement with political power. When religious discourse becomes a vehicle for exclusionary nationalism, it can undermine the inclusive ideals enshrined

in Pancasila. This tension highlights the dual character of religion in Indonesian public life: a source of solidarity under certain conditions and a catalyst of fragmentation under others.

C. Challenges of Balancing Religious Harmony and Freedom

Balancing religious harmony with the protection of individual freedoms represents one of the most persistent challenges in Indonesia's constitutional development. The state's communitarian approach to pluralism emphasizes intergroup harmony and social order, sometimes at the expense of expansive interpretations of personal liberty (Menchik, 2016). Regulations governing blasphemy, proselytization, and the construction of houses of worship illustrate the delicate equilibrium between preventing conflict and safeguarding rights (Crouch, 2014). Critics argue that prioritizing harmony can legitimize majoritarian dominance, particularly in regions where minorities lack political leverage.

Inclusive policy design is therefore essential to sustaining pluralism. Legal reforms that clarify administrative procedures, strengthen judicial oversight, and ensure equal access to public services can mitigate discriminatory practices. The Constitutional Court has occasionally acted to expand recognition of indigenous belief systems, signaling gradual movement toward broader inclusion. However, inconsistencies in local enforcement remain a significant obstacle, reflecting the decentralized nature of governance (Buehler, 2016). Achieving coherence between national constitutional guarantees and regional regulations requires sustained institutional coordination.

Constitutional interpretation also plays a critical role in addressing interfaith tensions. The preservation of the 1965 Blasphemy Law, upheld in judicial review, demonstrates the judiciary's cautious approach to redefining doctrinal boundaries (Crouch, 2014). While intended to prevent social unrest, such legal instruments may inadvertently suppress minority expression. The challenge lies in crafting jurisprudence that protects both public order and substantive equality, ensuring that freedom of religion encompasses not only recognized majorities but also heterodox and indigenous communities. Ultimately, the Indonesian experience illustrates that religious harmony and religious freedom are not mutually exclusive but require continuous negotiation. Effective nation-building depends on institutions capable of

mediating disputes without privileging particular interpretations of faith. By fostering inclusive citizenship grounded in constitutional principles, Indonesia can strengthen its pluralistic identity while mitigating the divisive pressures of exclusivism. The enduring task is to ensure that religion remains a source of ethical guidance and collective solidarity rather than a fault line of fragmentation within the national project.

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