

# **RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN THE INDONESIAN DEMOCRATIC ERA<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The Indonesian democratic era has provided hope for the growth of mutual social practices established upon diversity of ethnicity, religions, race, and inter-group relations. Yet, in the last decade, various forms of violence were often carried out on behalf of religion instead. These acts of violence were not only physical but psychological (cultural) as well, in the form of discrimination, abuse, expulsion, insult, and threat. The Ahmadiyya sect and Shia cases, for instance, provide an outlook regarding the prevalence of violence within social practices in the community in response to differences. Why does such violence remain to occur in Indonesia? Aside from a 'failed understanding of religious texts', excessive truth claim also triggers acts of religious violence in the current era of Indonesian democracy. It is of utmost importance that people's understanding and interpretation of differences be set straight so that any response to differences can be considered as an embryo of national power that serves as an instrument employed for uniting the people of this nation instead of disuniting them.

**Keywords: religious violence, democratic era, Indonesia.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The reality of diverse ethnicities, races, and religions found in Indonesia is a blessing that makes for more complete and dynamic order in life. The diversity of this nation has evolved and developed into the strong pillar that it is until this day. During the pre-independence era, the diverse entities above became united to fight against the colonialists. However, such diversity does indeed bear consequences in the relational patterns of each element, particularly regarding the relations of religions (read: religious followers). Aside from established compromises that led us to harmony, there were also contestation and even violence/conflict which followed along this nation's journey. Historically speaking, religious diversity in

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Indonesia has undergone highly varying and fluctuating relations in which it is at times interspersed by violence that largely resulted in numerous casualties and losses of both lives and wealth.

Some of the cases which had occurred in the past two decades were those found in Poso, Ambon<sup>2</sup>, Papua, and Sambas along with other cases which emphasize that interreligious relationship in Indonesia experiences a stage that waxes and wanes. The open conflict between Islam and Christianity becomes a phenomenon that is often observed in Indonesia's religious 'contestation'. The case of Maluku is one of significant conflicts in Indonesia which brought huge damages in facilities and societies. This case also demonstrated that a conflict involved many players. John Braithwaite with Leah Dunn (2010:195) found that Ambonese Christian and Muslim youth gangs in Jakarta and Ambon, Indonesian military, Indonesian police especially Brimob, Laskar Jihad, Laskar Mujahidin, Laskar Kristus and other militias, and Moluccan politicians playing the religion card were the key-war making actors. They also concluded that "Maluku is the first of a number of Indonesian case that are challenging our starting theory that reconciliation without truth is not possible." (2010:193)

The current Indonesian contemporary-democratic era should not be littered by inter- and intra-religious contestations that lead to conflict, but it should be more accommodating and open to mutual compromise for the sake of attaining a more harmonious and humanistic Indonesian society at all levels of life. It seems that romanticism toward either intra- or inter-religious relations is merely an 'empty memory' when referring to the various occurring cases of violence. These acts of violence involving followers of the same religion or of different ones continue to happen. Why is that so?

## **RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN NUMBERS**

The Wahid Foundation (Institute), Setara Institute, and Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS) periodically provide information and data analyses concerning religious violence in Indonesia. According to the data, phenomena of violence involving religions have repeatedly occurred with similar patterns.

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Bertrand (2002) observes that violence or conflict in Ambon does not stand alone, and it's not purely caused by religion. He opines that problems of economy, politics, and past history also triggered violence to happen there. During the colonial era, Christianity was the dominant group and they had control over almost all sectors of life. Muslims were the marginal group at the time. This condition was subsequently overturned when Indonesia gained independence, wherein Christian dominance has since been gradually taken over by the Muslim group.

Setara Institute in 2016 showed that throughout 2015, as many as 197 incidents relating to violence involved religious groups either internally or externally. Christians (29 incidents) and Shia followers (31 incidents) were the groups that mostly became victims of violence/protests (Setara Institute, 2016). The most dominant type of violence confronted by the two groups were violations in the form of forcing a belief or forcing to conduct religious teachings. The burning of the Saman Church in Bantul, Yogyakarta and the demolition of three churches in the regency of Aceh Singkil are some examples of the incidents.

The Wahid Institute also presents various incidents of violence experienced by certain religious groups. For instance, in 2015, there were 158 incidents with 187 acts and a number of these cases involved state or non-state actors (Laporan Tahunan, 2015:12). The amount above showed a 12% drop than previous year. The types of violation also varied, such as sealing off house of worship, criminalization, and discrimination based on religion, accusation as heretical sect, and intimidation of certain religious group. The perpetrators of violence were from various elements, including religious institutions, mass organizations, the masses, and other organizations.

The Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS) periodically launches a report pertaining to religious life in Indonesia. In 2008, conflicts relating to house of worship remain prevalent. There were 14 cases relating to house of worship such as destruction, prohibition of worship, dismissal during worship, demolition, conflict of religious followers, residents' refusal of religious activities, and stopping activities of worship (CRCS, 2009: 18-20). In 2009, CRCS reported 25 cases relating to discourses on heretics and religious blasphemy, and 20 similar cases in 2012 (CRCS, 2012: 59-65).

In 2010, CRCS launched issues relating to houses of worship. Since January to December 2010, there had been 20 cases of violence in relation to houses of worship, such as destruction, eviction of religious followers, burning of houses of worship, and even demand for imprisoning certain religious figures. In 2011, the number of violence relating to houses of worship had risen to 36 cases (CRCS, 2011: 48-53).

The cases of violence above generally involved Christianity and Islam. Cases prohibiting the building of churches, dismissing Christians' services, attacks on Christians became another 'color' of religious life in recent years. In addition to violence concerning other religions (Christianity), issues involving the Ahmadiya sect were also quite prevalent during the 2000s. CRCS stated that in 2009, there were 11 cases relating to Ahmadiyya. The public's demand regarding the Ahmadiyya sect was varied, some demanded them to be dispersed, completely banned, monitored, and even consecration of Ahmadiyya followers by renouncing

their faith and converting to mainstream Islam. Acts of violence are still experienced by Ahmadiyya followers today (2017) by means of various patterns.

In 2015, religious conflicts were varied as politics had become infused into them. Religious politicization emerged in many forms such as the use of houses of worship as campaign media and the use of the anti-Shia issue in campaigns which were among methods used by certain regional head candidates to gain more electorates as is the case in Sampang, Madura, East Java (CRCS, 2015: 17). This case provides an outlook in which the use of identity, including Shia, still adorns the map of both local and national politics.

## **TRIGGERS OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE**

### *Truth Claim*

In any religious tradition, claims of truth and the superiority of one's religion constantly arise as it is an essential part of the construction of faith. As accentuated in Islam that, "*Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam*" (QS. Ali Imran: 19) and "*And whoever desires other than Islam as a religion – never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers*" (QS. Ali Imran: 85). The verses above emphasize a 'single' form of truth that solely belongs to Islam. Such claim is constantly maintained and institutionalized through various media such as forum for religious studies, learning, speeches, and other media as an effort to strengthen the followers' faith concerning the truth of their religious teaching. This may be interpreted as a claim of absolute truth.

Every religious follower is even 'obligated' to embrace such attitude and it is not considered a mistake because such effort or attitude is carried out for the sake of 'justifying' the follower's choice in the religion adhered to. However, a grave problem will come to surface when outsiders are coerced to follow what is believed to be the truth. Preaching one's religion may indeed be the obligation of every religious follower, but it should be conducted elegantly (in the Quran it is mentioned to be done through *hikmah* or wisdom) and countering (opposing) opinions should also be done through proper means. It is said in the Quran to "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best..." (QS. An Nahl: 125). This means that the method of *hikmah* (wisdom) serves as a significant indicator in inviting others to follow Islam. It is for this very reason that violent methods or means are not justified.

Truth claim<sup>3</sup> that may become ‘excessive’ will have an impact in establishing relationships that tend to be closed-minded toward people/group of other religions. Truth claim of one’s religion should be equally coupled with openness (inclusivity) and should still provide space for other people/groups to practice what they believe. An exclusive attitude has the potential to bring about suspicion, hate, and the notion that other people/groups are non-existent and they do not have any chance of attaining good. Actually, the humanistic aspect of religion may be approached from the reality that religion is also regarded as a primordial human nature (*fitrah*) that is revealed. This is aimed at fortifying the primordial human nature that is already inherent within the human self. Humanistic values should not be in opposition to religious values, and vice versa. (Madjid, 1992: xvi).

Violence often becomes the main option in dealing with differences, wherein one of the triggers is excessive truth claim. Among its causes is the lack of understanding about one’s own religion, even narrow-minded understanding which leaves no room for truth of other religions is included. Self righteous attitude (in the context of differing belief/religion) has a clear theological basis. However, a complex issue lies in the ‘negation’ of other religions and other religious followers. Oddly enough, there are quite a few Islamic followers who condemn or consider their fellow Muslims as infidels (*takfiri*) deserving to be eliminated. People or groups that hold differing views are considered deviants, wrong, conservative, and infidels. They are opposed because they are positioned as people/groups that are outside the ‘mainstream Islam’.

In the Indonesian context, the acts of violence experienced by the Jamaah Ahmadiyah Indonesia (JAI) and Shia followers serve as striking cases. Both these groups became easy pickings for certain Islamic groups that are based on different understanding of Islam. Difference of opinion/understanding is actually nothing new in Islam. Differences in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) were actually quite deep in terms of worshipping practices in the Islamic world. There are four main schools of thought (*madhhab*) of imams within *fiqh* that remain to be observed by Muslims today. All four have differing interpretation to ritual matters, but they remain within a single frame of theological understanding. They have the same main source of reference, namely the Quran and Hadith. They have the same *shahada* (Islamic

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<sup>3</sup> Aside from truth claim, interpretation of texts also plays a role in making certain group or people to take action. Truth claim and narrow interpretation of texts, both contribute in the progressively strengthening assumption that differences are the source of violence or conflict (Hasse J, 2011). Very textual interpretations tend to provide literal understandings and they are considered insufficient to analyze the phenomena of differences among religious followers today. Regarding the matter, contextual interpretations that do not leave out inherent textual substances are undoubtedly necessary.

testament of faith) and the same messenger. Yet, they do not blame or condemn each other, let alone consider them as infidels and negate or mutually annihilate each other.

JAI in Kuningan, West Java, for example, was a victim of violence, both violence of physical battery, and discriminative actions, including verbal violence through various inappropriate expletives (Andreas, 2015). Such was also the case for the Shia group in Sampang, Madura that was attacked in which their mosque and residence were burned. The two groups experienced similar position, wherein they were placed outside of mainstream Islam thereby requiring to be dealt with without due process of law. Vigilantism was instead promoted by conducting these attacks on JAI<sup>4</sup> and Shia groups.

The excuse often used to perpetrate acts of violence against a particular group (including JAI and Shia) is because it is regarded as a ‘splintered’<sup>5</sup> or ‘deviant’ group. This means a group that has separated itself from the common religious teachings (read: mainstream). Herein lies the dimension of ‘sin’, when a group/sect is immediately considered as being deviant merely due to differences in opinion and argumentation of a religious text, and even merely because of differences in religious practices. The secession of a group from the mainstream standard is not something which instantaneously happens. It is very much influenced by the dynamics of social context. A Shia follower, for instance, may have different understandings to Sunni (mainstream group in Indonesia), but it should at least be positioned as an ‘equalizer’, instead of a competitor to the majority group.

The advent of Islam itself, was not determined by a single dominant factor, as there were numerous factors which influenced Islam such as social, political, economic factors, and religious tradition. Islam, as do other religions, develops through various means; and its development has brought about many differences among its followers (Al Makin, 2016: 123). Islam is also practiced through a variety of ways depending on the selected school of thought. In a number of places in

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmadiyya in Indonesia has long become a ‘commodity’ for debate. A contra attitude toward Ahmadiyya has been observed to occur since 1929 when Muhammadiyah positioned Ahmadiyya (followers) as a faithless group. This continued in 1965 when East Sumatra Ulema issued a fatwa rejecting Ahmadiyya, which was followed by opinion of ulemas in several places emphasizing the similar statement that the teachings of Ahmadiyya are heretical (Crouch, 2008: 7-8).

<sup>5</sup> This term is often stated by Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur). He used this terminology as a translation for “*splinter group*”. The word itself has no particular connotation to any religious sect, but it is used for small groups that separates itself (splinters) from a party or social and political organization. The word ‘*splinter group*’, in terms of terminology close to religious matters, relates to the word ‘sect’ (Ernas in Rajab and Basri, 2016: vi).

Indonesia, Islamic practices that are different to other places are easily found. They have a different way of expressing Islam because it has infused into the tradition/culture leaving its followers to practice Islam according to the context it is in. However, as Hans Georg Gadamer found, tradition becomes human limitation and it makes human beings not possible to understand something outside their tradition. Therefore, they need to have a dialogue with the others to make their understanding larger than before. This is what he called as *fusion of horizon*. (Gadamer, 1075) Thus, it is impossible to push someone to be exclusivist or inclusivist since human limitation, but the changing is truly possible when someone opens themselves through dialogue and fusion of horizon occurs. One of important things in this case is the awareness that human's ability to understand are limited, thus different understandings are not something disturbing which in turn make people respect to the others. (Hidayati, 2010)

### ***Conditions of Global Geopolitics***

The dynamics and escalation of global politics also contribute to the prevalence of various forms of violence conducted on behalf of religion in Indonesia. The various discriminatory actions experienced by Muslims in several corners of the world incited rage within Islamic groups in Indonesia. The most recent case is the eviction of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. This incident immediately triggered responses of many Muslim countries, including Indonesia. The Rohingya case may, arguably, not be a case of religious violence, yet such argument remains difficult to accept. This is because, those being evicted are Muslims and the fact is that they reside in a country of non-Muslim majority. As a response based on Islamic camaraderie, the sympathy of the Muslim world flowed generously. Various acts and rallies were conducted to show solidarity and commitment of defending their Muslim 'brothers & sisters' who are facing violence.

The case of Rohingya Muslims is purely considered as religious violence, instead of a mere domestic issue of a country where it might be the case that religion only plays a small part in the whole incident. Nevertheless, several groups in Indonesia consider the Rohingya case as acts of violence perpetrated upon Muslims living there. This claim is not wrong, since those experiencing violence are indeed Muslims. It is, however, indirectly concluded as a case of religious violence despite there being several factors which led the incident to its current state.

The responses given for cases experienced by Muslims in other countries prove that the world Muslim solidarity remains very strong, although it may be

temporary and casuistic. What is felt and experienced by Muslims in other countries will garner similar response in other Muslim countries, as is often observed in Indonesia. However, these responses are often expressed ‘excessively’, because the violence experienced by Muslims on the other side of the globe may be dealt with through similar means. Meaning that violence occurring in another place is subsequently countered with ‘violence’ in Indonesia as well. Ultimately, a non-conductive atmosphere flows vigorously into the country instead because violence is replied with violence although through relatively different means. Such conditions may even be camouflaged in various forms, starting from open violence such as attacks, rallies, and eviction of other groups particularly the minority.

Based on the above explanation, religion and violence or conflict are inseparable. Andreas Hasenclever and Volker Rittberger (2000) present three theoretical perspectives which may be utilized in reading the relation between religion and conflict. *First*, the primordialists argue that religion in itself contains inherent element that leads to conflict. When ‘religious conflict’ happens, religion is viewed as an independent variable, which is the element that does not depend on other aspects, and the difference in religious identity itself may be enough to stimulate conflict. The JAI and Shia conflicts in Indonesia can be a reference point for this perspective since they are considered to have deviated from mainstream Islam leading them to become a target of violence and trigger for conflict.

Meanwhile, the *second* perspective, the instrumentalists view the role of religion in ‘religious conflict’ as a mere instrument. Religion has no objective role in and of itself, thus conflict is triggered by the presence of economic and political interests. Religion merely serves as a rhetoric, its relation to conflict is a quasi one. Take the examples of the JAI and Shia cases, many people saw them as not merely a religious issue, but more concerning a political one. Elite politics directs the public to consider them merely as religious matters. Religious instrumentalization by the elites, even religious politicization seems effective in garnering attention and support of the masses. Muslims in Indonesia eventually considered Shia followers as deviant religious adherents who must be corrected and converted to pure Islam. JAI in Kuningan was not a mere ideological matter as well, since it was also imbued with nuances of religious politicization that was simply accepted by the public.

The *Third* perspective is the constructivists. This theoretical perspective lies between the two approaches in the above passages. Constructivists are in line with instrumentalists who view that the fundamental cause of conflict is not religion, but interest. Constructivists agree with primordialists who see religion as having a real objective role, meaning that although religion is not the main cause of conflicts, it helps to accelerate them. In this case, once religion is involved in conflict, it may exacerbate the conflict into becoming more fatal. But, they disagree with the



primordialists who argue that religion is an independent variable in conflict. This is because in their opinion, religion operates dependently, being reliant on other economic and political factors surrounding the conflict; to what extent does religion contribute in escalating conflicts depends on how acute are the clashes between economic and political interests in the conflict.

## **UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCES**

Differences or diversity is an unavoidable social reality. It is the course of God or *sunnatullah*. Diversity is God's decree and it is unquestionably absolute. In QS. Al Maidah: 48, it is mentioned that it was God's will not to have made mankind into one nation (united in religion). QS. Al Hujurat: 13 also reiterates that Allah created mankind into peoples and tribes with the aim that one may know another. And by knowing one another, mankind has the potential to gain mutual understanding so that all forms of disputes may subsequently be avoided.

Differences in ethnicity, race, religion, and such complete the life of man in this world. It is difficult to imagine mankind originating from one ethnicity, one race, and one religion. Perhaps, life will be monotonous without any variations eventually leading to ever present boredom and dreariness. In truth, religious differences may be interpreted and positioned as a means to understand one's own religion. Islam, for example, can be widely known because it is compared to other religions such as Christianity and Judaism. Hence, differences provide the opportunity for all people/groups to learn from each other and produce a sense of mutual understanding and respect. Yet, concerning the reality observed in the life of the nation, it is instead the opposite wherein differences become a means for attacking and condemning each other leading to disputes and even conflicts occurring every where.

The low level of tolerance in accepting a different other which may well lead people toward becoming egoistic and fanatical. Egoism appears in the form of rigid claims that consider everything of foreign origin as something erroneous. They consider that only one truth prevails and it is one that comes from their own self and group. Whereas the presence of other people and groups are negated, both existentially and their roles in life. Other people or groups are positioned as competitors and enemies that must be annihilated even through violence. Violence has even become a means for coercing their will against others.

In addition to religious teaching which boldly instructs Muslims to invite others by way of *hikmat* or wisdom, the Indonesian nation also has a mechanism that has been proven to be effective in establishing harmony and resolving conflicts between differing communities. A local mechanism which is widely known as local

wisdoms are present in every community throughout the Indonesian archipelago. For example, in the Maluku community, *pela* and *gandong* is recognized as a media for uniting two differing ethnicities into one amicable camaraderie. These institutions serve as a media for reconciliation and for strengthening social cohesion (see. Al Qurtuby, 2016:104). The people in those communities do not come from the same lineages (genealogy), yet they can live together in an atmosphere of peace founded on the spirit of friendship. Despite originally coming from different villages or regions, they are joined in a single alliance through the use of *pela* and *gandong*.

Thus is also the case in the Bugis community, wherein a local wisdom called *sipakatau* is widely recognized. *Sipakatau* literally means to humanize human beings. This is similar to the spirit of *ngewonke wong* found in the Javanese community. By using such spirit of determination, whatever differences there may be will be reduced to a single union, that is a union of respect to human dignity. This means that there should be no room for condemning each other let alone for eliminating one another for the mere sake of differences. Within the context of the life of the people and of the nation, differences or diversity should be understood as a source of power because it is a 'basic element' for establishing togetherness. Togetherness itself is not something that can be created in an instant, it is present through a long developing process. The togetherness or intimacy present within the frame of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) may be considered as undeniable evidence concerning the results created from intermeshing existing differences. Any differences should be understood as a natural condition, hence, the existence of other identities would not be positioned as threats, but as partners who will mutually strengthen each other instead.

Differences should also be understood to mean grace and blessing so that our lives become more meaningful. And not the other way around, wherein differences are understood as a curse, source of disaster, source of disintegration, and source of conflict leading to mutual hatred and admonishment then ending in mutual annihilation. This is one of the challenges faced by humanity, particularly Indonesia as a nation of pluralities and established upon differences in ethnicities, race, religion, and other differences. Indonesia is, indeed, required to constantly reproduce its symbols of cohesion and unity to function more effectively so that disputes and violence (conflicts) no longer become a part of this nation.

Diversity can actually be managed based on a multicultural scheme (Nurkhoirin, 2007:3). It is a proven fact that there is a strong desire to carry out arrangements based on the spirit of uniformity rendering one of the distinctive features of the Indonesian nation, namely religiosity and pluralism, to be cut off. Management of differences and diversity, particularly concerning religion, should

unconditionally be conducted accurately. The paradigm of management should also be directed at understanding the meaning of religious differences as something that must be accepted, not annihilated. Differences are an invaluable grace of God that should be maintained and preserved, not annihilated for the sake of any interest. This thought should be existed in religious institutions especially at local or grassroot level since they are directly interacted with various communities. This also leads to the significant role of religious insitutions in preventing communal violence. As Juan, Pierskalla and Vuller (2015) found, ‘a high density of local religious institutions decreases the likelihood of communal violence.’”

## CONCLUSION

The still prevailing religious violence in the current era of democratic Indonesia provides an illustration about the presence of a people/group relationship that is highly dynamic but tends to be closed-minded. The series of religious violence, either inter- or intra-religious ones, are phenomena that have various implications in the efforts of creating a more harmonious and open relationship. Violence may happen from time to time and it causes fluctuating relations among religions and religious followers of the same belief. Violence itself, within the context of this article, may be observed from two opposing contexts. *Firstly*, contestation of either inter- or intra-religion are very intense. Contestation does not only relate to ‘struggle for followers/adherents’, but also the struggle for influence in all things including the political field. *Secondly*, truth claims among religions become one of the tools of ‘attack’ causing violence to often become an option even a priority due to availability of text interpretations that only refer to the argument of their own group. *Thirdly*, the conditions of religious followers in other countries also influence the response of Muslims in Indonesia who conduct their actions on behalf of religion to pass judgment upon a particular group as a form of solidarity.

Religious violence bay be avoided by changing the understanding of the meaning of differences. This can be accomplished through the following measures. *Firstly*, changing the paradigm in defining an existing difference. Differences that in many ways are considered as the main cause of violence, should currently be considered as main source of strength in building unity or togetherness. Differences are a main source of power. Differences which are regarded as a means to compete, can be changed to become a media for mutual synergy. *Secondly*, establishing awareness on the beauty and significance of differences. Differences should be understood as a way to do our best, not who is the best. Therefore, differences will no longer be seen as a source of disaster, differences will become a blessing that is most meaningful in a dynamics of social life that is religious and diverse.

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