



Political and Legal Improvisation on the Issue of Religious Politicization: A Study of the Forum for Religious Harmony in Indonesia

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Abstract

Religious harmony in Indonesia still necessitates special attention since a balance must be established among the country's six religions. From a political and legal standpoint, examining the Religious Harmony Forum's performance in sustaining religious harmony in Indonesia is vital. This study employed the normative juridical research approach. The statutory technique was adopted, and the library research method was the search system. According to the findings, encouraging religious unity through the Religious Unity Forum is vital in preventing religion from becoming politicized in Indonesia. Concerns are developing about the role of religion, particularly Islam, in coping with the growing prominence of extremist groups, notably by justifying religious politicization. As problems and policies concerning intra-and inter-religious harmony are improved politically and legally through an institution known as the Religious Harmony Forum, it is critical



to encourage the passage of the Draft Law on Religious Harmony as soon as possible in order to strengthen the Religious Harmony Forum's role in maintaining religious harmony in Indonesia. Communication is crucial in building intra- and inter-religious harmony and preventing religion from being politicized in Indonesia.

Keywords: Politics, law, politicization, religion, religious harmony.

Introduction

Indonesia has a history of ethnic and religious conflict that poses challenges to the nation's life. The Suharto government (1966-1998) banned using religious symbols for political identification and demanded that all organizations be tolerant and inclusive (Kral, 1999). The conflict in Malacca, where about 4,000 people died in Christian-Muslim fighting and about 500,000 were displaced, was one of the worst conflicts in Indonesia. Other factors contributing to communal and ethnic violence include transmigration, territorial control, and the communications revolution (Jones, 2022). Religious intolerance in Indonesia, sometimes culminating in violence, continues to rise, with 236 violent incidents recorded in 2015 (Indonesia-investments.com, 2016).

Furthermore, Christians' experience violence and oppressive regulations, such as *inter alia*, the Religious Harmony Regulation, which has led to the closure of more than 2,000 churches since its promulgation (Arman, 2022). Before several major or universal religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity) arrived, each ethnic group had its ethnicity. This ethnicity was part of the tribe's identity and did not conflict with other religions. However, with the entry of universal religions, religious identity became more critical, and conflicts arose between different religious groups (Aritonang, 2002). Indonesia's democratic fundamentals are much more robust and transparent, and regional violence has disappeared. However, religious intolerance and violence continue to challenge the Indonesian state.

Before establishing the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), various issues that led to inter-religious conflicts were resolved through religious channels (Bali.kemenag.go.id, 2019). However, conflicts between religious communities are not solely caused by religious factors but also by political, economic, or other factors (Lubis, 2021). FKUB was established to bridge the gap between religious communities but has not reached the entire community (Utoyo, 2016). FKUBs have played a role in resolving religious conflicts in Indonesia by promoting tolerance and harmony between religious communities (Miharja & Mulyana, 2019). The Vice President of Indonesia, K.H. Ma'ruf Amin, urged FKUB to prepare a strategy to stop the spread of hoaxes and maintain religious harmony in the country (Kominfo.go.id, 2021).

So far, the Indonesian government has protected all citizens from practising their religion, despite the country's diverse ethnicities, cultures and religions (Kemenkumham.go.id, 2022). The country's motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means "unity in diversity", reflects its philosophy of uniting its diverse population. Based on this understanding, the Central Government has established the Forum for Religious Harmony in Indonesia. Article 25, paragraph 1 letter c of Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 23 of 2014 governing Regional Government contains provisions regarding the Religious Harmony Forum. The Forum for Religious Harmony in Indonesia was established based on the Minister of Religious Affairs and Minister of Home Affairs Regulations No. 8 and 9 of 2006. However, this theological study will explain how the Religious Harmony Forum in Indonesia needs to be studied from a political and legal perspective.



Literature Review

Various organizations and individuals have researched Religious Harmony Forums in different parts of the world. Previous research has emphasized the importance of building and promoting a new concept of religious harmony to face the challenges of religious diversity in a globalized world (Zuo'an, 2013). In addition, previous studies have discussed interfaith movements and initiatives that bring people of different faiths together to address the world's most pressing issues. The article notes that encounters between people of different faiths can lead to more positive attitudes towards other religious groups, but for interfaith to succeed, change is needed within (Theconversation.com, 2021). Similarly, the Interfaith Harmony Forum in Malang City, Indonesia, and its activities to build harmony in community life. The paper concludes that the Interfaith Harmony Forum has successfully promoted interfaith harmony in the community (Kewuel et al., 2021).

Other studies have shown the importance of preparing communities for multiculturalism to sustain a decent life. The activities of the Religious Harmony Forum in Indonesia concluded that the forum has successfully promoted multiculturalism and interfaith harmony (Kewuel et al., 2019). A different study examined the thoughts and work of Maria Theresia Geme of the Religious Harmony Forum of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, on the issue of religious harmony. The study concluded that the forum has successfully promoted religious harmony in the region (Rohmawati et al., 2022). A report by the Pew Research Center, titled "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity," covers the religious affiliations, beliefs, and practices of Muslims in different countries. The report includes an appendix with comparable results from a previous Pew Research Center survey of Muslims in the United States (Pewresearch.org, 2012).

Method Employed

The descriptive qualitative method was employed for the investigation. The approach is normative juridical, and the search system is a library research method (Marzuki, 2011). The normative juridical approach is a legal research methodology that bases its analysis on relevant laws and regulations to the legal issues under consideration. A statutory approach will yield answers concerning the boundaries and standardization of law formation (Sihombing & Hadita, 2022). Literature research aims to select topics and identify key terms that explain concepts, problems, events, and people associated with the topic. Data analysis approaches include data reduction, presentation, and generating conclusions (Onwuegbuzi et al., 2016).

Results and Discussion

Religious Harmony and the Politicization of Religion in Indonesia

In Indonesia, religious harmony and religious politicization are challenges that lead to discrimination against religious minorities (Harsono, 2020). To approve the construction of houses of worship, Regulation No. 9/2006 of the Minister of Religious Affairs on Guidelines for Implementing the Tasks of Regional Heads/Deputy Regional Heads in Maintaining Religious Harmony, Empowering Religious Harmony Forums, and Establishing Houses of Worship requires the establishment of a "Religious Harmony Forum" in every local government in Indonesia. Because the membership of these forums is proportional to the number of religious communities in each region, the religious majority has veto power over the construction of houses of worship for religious minorities (Harsono, 2018). As a result, most of Indonesia's religious minorities encounter difficulties in constructing or renovating worship structures. While religious freedom is



guaranteed under the 1945 Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, legislation encouraging "religious harmony" weakens it.

The Yasmin Church issue exposes difficulties in Indonesia's strongly religious society, functioning as a microcosm of the contemporary battle over religious tolerance, harmony, and freedom (Marshall, 2023). While religious freedom, human rights, tolerance, and peace are commonly used interchangeably, their effects might be contradictory. Religious rituals and other potential causes of social and political strife abound in Indonesia. The obligation to safeguard religious freedom even if it offends others. It wants to keep its deeply rooted cultural commitment to religious concord and tolerance, even if it means suppressing true religious freedom in the service of social peace.

The US Department of State voiced concern in its 2021 and 2022 Reports on International Religious Freedom concerning attacks on religious minorities, the closure of places of worship, access for foreign religious groups, and blasphemy punishments in Indonesia (State.gov, 2021; State.gov, 2022). Religious conservatism and intolerance are rising throughout the archipelago, posing a severe danger to religious plurality and pluralistic democracy (Muhtadi, 2022). There are no straightforward solutions to these competing issues. On the other hand, the Indonesian government must maintain religious freedom as a fundamental concept and ensure that government employees do not support abuses against religious minorities.

Indonesians have long been concerned about the politicization of religion. The Muslim population in Indonesia is 87.2%. Religion has become increasingly important in national politics, with Islamic conservatism rising (Alimin, 2017). In Indonesia, the connection between secular nationalism and political Islam has always been difficult. Sukarno, Indonesia's first President, strove to reconcile the three groups for nation-building during the creation of the Indonesian constitution. However, whether the government could retain a secular constitution or incorporate Political Islam for future stability remained to be seen (Adrianto, 2021).

In 2017, the Jakarta gubernatorial election was won by a candidate pair championed by the politicization of religion, particularly Islamic religious identity (Alimin, 2017). The escalation of religious politicization in this Regional Head Election impacted other regions in Indonesia, especially North Sumatra Province (Nasution et al., 2023a; Nasution et al., 2023b). The strengthening of identity politicization, particularly religious politicization, re-emerged in the 2019 elections in Indonesia (Ronaldo & Darmaiza, 2021). There are growing concerns about the role of religion, particularly Islam, in Indonesia's largely democratic society (Hamayotsu, 2014). Interfaith movements are also struggling with the growing strength of radical groups on the political scene in Indonesia, especially in justifying the politicization of religion (Globalministries.org, 2019).

Promoting religious harmony through the Religious Harmony Forum is vital in anticipation of the politicization of religion in Indonesia. However, the forum has been criticized for allowing adherents of the majority religion to have veto power over the construction of houses of worship of minority religions, thus hampering the religious freedom rights of minority religious groups in Indonesia. Therefore, the Religious Harmony Forum should promote peaceful coexistence, and religious tolerance is essential for maintaining social harmony in Indonesia (Subchi et al., 2022). In addition, the government needs to actively promote peaceful coexistence to prevent conflicts, resolve conflicts, and move forward. Thus, Indonesia can maintain unity in diversity and maintain harmonious relationships between all diverse people, whether in religious beliefs, ethnicity, or culture (Rosyada, 2017).



Religious Harmony Status Quo Forum

Religion is one of the essential components in the formation of national character. To build an orderly, safe, and prosperous state and society, Pancasila is the state ideology. The 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia outlines a powerful legal position on the concept of God Almighty as in the first principle of Pancasila. These essential favourable laws are addressed to the people of Indonesia, who must always pay attention to them and make them part of the law in all aspects of their lives - personal, social, national and political. By looking at the interrelationship between Indonesian law, it is clear that religious law plays a vital role in creating national law and that the laws of an organized society require precise rules based on religious doctrine. How significant is the contribution of Islamic Sharia to the development of Indonesian National Law based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (Bourchier, 2019).

The relationship between religion, law and government has existed since World War II, about two decades ago. Not all countries allow their citizens to freely express their opinions about the role of religion in society, the state and the constitution. The debate on the bond between religion and the state is closely related to Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (Ahmad, 1993). The existence of human beings and their environment through three different aspects: law, government and religion. They may support, encourage and even influence each other. They can also contradict each other and come into conflict simultaneously. The constitutions of each country, enacted after World War II, complement the position of religion in the language of each country by placing law and state above reality. Law and religion were considered secondary legal frameworks when some nation-states achieved independence (Azra, 2020).

According to Schnabel, there are three ways in which the influence of the state on society changes: The first is the direct effect of recognizing and protecting social rights. Second, establishing a government machine with power and experience leads to indirect effects. Third, the hope is that government intervention will help solve society's problems. The recognition and defence of human rights are central to the concepts of "rule of law" and "rechtstaat", but in the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, the emphasis is on "harmonious interaction between the government and the people based on the principle of harmony" (Na'imah, 2016).

The mindset of society includes a sense of obligation towards all people, respecting all people, and treating all people fairly. At the same time, the pursuit of harmony itself encompasses a range of other factors, including acting as social glue (social cohesion), cultural identity (cultural identity), ensuring equal access to and participation in opportunities, and one's sense of duty, commitment and engagement with society and the state. Several regions have established Religious Harmony Forums (FKUB) to improve religious harmony in Indonesia. The "legal canopy" that once covered the FKUB's legal basis is now gone. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has drafted a Bill on the Protection of Religious Believers to address these issues. The central concept of the act, "Protection", should be clear and oriented toward religious harmony in Indonesia (Miharja & Mulyana, 2019).

Systematic attempts to foster inter-religious harmony through bureaucracy make the harmony built more open to the whims of power and more elitist and formal. At the most fundamental level, there must be significant alignment and grounding. Similar to previous experiences, pseudo-harmony rather than real harmony is produced. The current state of religious tolerance is an essential resource for the survival of the entire Indonesian population. The current state of



religious life in Indonesia is influenced by religious diversity, with all its advantages and disadvantages.

Indonesians are accustomed to accepting it by coexisting peacefully in the spirit of national togetherness. However, simply accepting differences without understanding their true nature and meaning leaves one open to the temptation of primordialism and egocentrism on the part of both individuals and groups. When religious sentiments and symbols are used as axes or triggers, discord can quickly develop. Tolerance is the way to ensure that religious practices are not divided. Tolerance should be a habit that is continuously developed through interpersonal social interactions. With various divine beliefs and earthly religions in the lives of human beings, tolerance in religious life becomes an imperative.

Because of the realm of politics and power, religion has become a source of societal instability. Also due to our hypocrisy in dealing with pluralism, we may soon face conflicts caused by the prejudices of both the majority and the minority. Diversity has always been seen as an issue that can lead to conflict rather than as a resource that can be utilized to build our society. This intensifies the need for harsh and irrational government initiatives to promote interfaith harmony. This absurdity is demonstrated by the disparity between policies that promote harmony and the reality that creates disharmony.

As a result, Indonesia's reform is influenced by the political philosophy of harmony, with all its advantages and disadvantages. The various religious policies that emerged in this reform era reflected the ideal religious life seen as ideal by each power broker of the transitional regime. In Indonesia, the transition to democracy and a new political system also affected how people practised their religion. It makes sense that these transitional policies do not represent the idealized state. They reflect the authorities' reticence towards the difficulties posed by the complexities of religious life, in addition to the outdated paradigms that still linger in the minds of policymakers. The dominant legacy of the past, especially SARA politicization, cannot be separated from this dilemma (Nasution, 2017), such as for example, destroying places of worship, eradicating other religions, or even religious wars. This results from the network of religious harmony forums (FKUB), which routinely conduct studies on the value of interfaith tolerance or even conferences on religious moderation. It is not only religious leaders who advocate peaceful coexistence. However, the present youth encourage the population to coexist peacefully. An association of religious youth harmony forums reflects this (Sutrisno & Sugiarto, 2022).

FKUB uses several things, such as books, magazines, newspapers, banners, and billboards. Verbal communication used by FKUB through books, journals, and newspapers includes invitations and appeals to obey government regulations on the principles of religious harmony and invitations and appeals not to cause disturbances and disputes. FKUB will identify the people it wants to reach with its initiatives to promote peace and tolerance, such as discussions with interfaith leaders, female role models, those in charge of places of worship, religious instructors, and religious leaders, teachers, youth, university and high school students, and neighbourhood leaders. The concept of tolerance and harmony understood by the younger generation is that as the successor of this nation, they should not bring up the issue of differences in religion and belief. All elements of society need to contribute to achieving common goals (Wikanda et al., 2020).

Political and Legal Improvisation of Religious Harmony Forum as Prevention of Religious Politicization in Indonesia

Religious harmony is synonymous with religious freedom because it promotes harmony among people. Hence, the first legal opinion on religious freedom and its relationship to religious harmony



is expanded on this topic. Everyone is granted the freedom and liberty to practice their religion. This harmony enhances national stability, accelerates national development, creates peace in society, strengthens and maintains a sense of brotherhood, forms a sense of security, and reduces religious strife (Ikhwan, 2020). Indonesia's multiplicity of religions and beliefs is undeniable – its understanding a pluralistic culture makes Indonesia a multi-religious country.

Indonesia's religious beliefs are diverse and its perspective of understanding a pluralistic society is good. Indonesia's government has designated six official religions: Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Catholicism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Meetings with FKUB administrators or members consisting of representatives of interfaith institutions, and dialogues with religious leaders and community leaders, as well as accommodating the aspirations of religious organizations and the community is important. Thus, channelling the aspirations of religious organizations and the community in the form of recommendations as material for government policy, and taking inventory of religious harmony issues at the sub-district level are examples of critical FKUB activities (Prayuda et al., 2019).

From a religious perspective, diversity is God's gift and will; if God wants, it is certainly not challenging to make His servants uniform and similar. However, God wants people to be ethnically and nationally diverse, to make life dynamic, to learn from each other, and get to know each other and live in harmony. So, isn't diversity extraordinary? We should be grateful for the diversity of Indonesia. In addition to various religions and beliefs, within each religion, there is a diversity of interpretations of religious teachings, especially regarding religious practices and rituals. Generally, each interpretation of religious teachings has adherents who believe in the truth of their interpretation.

When the available interpretations of the truth cannot be followed, a religious believer is empowered to choose the middle way (moderate), thanks to their understanding of diversity. When a religious person does not realize other possible approaches to the truth, he or she will often take an extreme stance. In this situation, religious moderation plays a vital role as a perspective on religion. Its population's very different perspectives and interests are managed in Indonesia, where a fully open democratic system exists so that all desires can be channelled effectively. Similarly, our constitution grants religious people the freedom to embrace and practice religious teachings by their beliefs (Fathurahman, 2020).

In Indonesia, the relationship between the national government and the state of citizens with national issues, regional ethnic issues using minority immigrants, as well as competition for resources, economics, power (politics), social and cultural issues, and finally, the highest impact on economic issues using religious conflicts, all contribute to the lack of harmony between people. Speaking of belief, since belief and discourse are deeply intertwined, faith is the foundation of all religions (Anwar, 2022). Vertical conflict is a structural civilization polarized in income, education, and power, while horizontal conflict is a structural society in which ethnicity, religion, race and social rank. In society, religious conflict often materializes. Sometimes it occurs due to the stigma developed among them, and the reported and unreported facts on social media at times trigger heated debates (Amirullah et al., 2020).

The Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) is critical for establishing religious harmony in Indonesia. Communities want FKUBs to help the government protect religion and resolve several other difficulties (Purwandari et al., 2022). Faced with potential challenges, the government, religious communities, and other relevant parties must take responsibility and advocate for religious harmony, resolving religious disputes and conflicts, fostering societal harmony, and maintaining world peace. Commit to religious freedom through addressing the relationship between religious



organizations and the government. Ensure that religious organizations and governments keep their promises and promote positive discussion. Religious groups must adapt to society's progress and development by changing, adhering to secular laws, respecting public norms, and contributing to social development by fully exploiting their unique advantages (Zuo'an, 2013).

The management of intra- and inter-religious communication is one of the causes of intolerance and extremism. With the Tri Kerukunan Umat Beragama policy, the government addressed the issue of intolerance and radicalism during the New Order era. The three harmonies are inter-religious harmony, inter-religious harmony, and government harmony. Problems and policies concerning intra- and inter-religious peace are now investigated and resolved by an institution known as FKUB. As a result, the role of communication in fostering intra- and inter-religious concord is significant. This is where communication management for intra- and inter-religious harmony is required. Communication management is mainly concerned with intra- and inter-religious harmony and communication on a larger scale. It overlaps with the reciprocal process of conveying messages and exchanging meanings to inform, persuade, or provide instructions based on the precise meaning in their distinct social settings (Iskandar, 2022).

Furthermore, Muslims must recognize the similarities between religious communities to foster inter-religious cooperation. It could be different in terms of religion. They do, however, share something in common as humans. They share a common ancestor in the Prophet Adam, a standard physical make-up (including the capacity for intelligence, emotion, and feeling), a familiar environment (the planet Earth), a standard food supply (the elements of the Earth), a standard air supply (the air we breathe), an expected end (death), a shared spiritual potential (intelligence, heart, soul, feelings), and a standard set of psychological tendencies (the desire for esteem, respect, and love, among others). With so many components in place, religious differences cannot be justified as a source of division. Beliefs differ, yet in human terms, they are the same. As a result, if a disaster strikes someone one day, they must be helped immediately, regardless of the religion they practice. These actions are taken since natural disasters, like car accidents, are not religious but humanitarian issues (Sari & Wasi, 2022).

Christian religious leaders who rely solely on contextual hermeneutics to interpret Scripture risk adopting a pluralistic worldview. The fourth step is to use whole verses in conjunction with socially pluralist verses and interpret them in a way that leads to more careful thought. For instance, in the context of Islamic religious authorities, the concept of exclusion is linked to theological issues. In contrast, plurality is linked to social or occupational fields (mullah). Privatization refers to relegating entire scripture passages to the private sphere so they may not be referenced in interfaith dialogue. Selective interpretation is a method of using particular passages to foster understanding between faiths. The hermeneutic pattern involves taking verses and figuring out what they mean. Conversely, the symmetrical pattern is explained by combining exclusive and pluralist verses and then applying the result to the current social context (Soleh & Rahmawati, 2020).

In preventing the politicization of religion in Indonesia, the Religious Harmony Forum is expected not only to be present in a mere ceremonial process but to have an essential role in maintaining religious harmony in Indonesia, which can be stabilized through political and legal approaches. The Religious Harmony Forum is improvised from both political and legal perspectives. In addition, it is vital to seek the ratification of the Religious Harmony Bill to enhance the role of the Religious Harmony Forum in improving religious harmony in Indonesia. In this condition, to maintain harmony in the lives of religious communities, activities that support religious harmony are organized, including celebrations and commemorations of religious holidays; dissemination of religion; funerals of the dead; establishment of places of worship.



The state, government, and society are obligated and responsible for implementing religious harmony, which includes respecting and ensuring the human rights of all religious believers without regard to ethnicity, religion, race, class, gender, culture, or language (Ode et al., 2023). Furthermore, it must support facilities and infrastructure in religious harmony implementation and oversee religious harmony implementation. Local officials and religious leaders ensure that religious spread does not promote division, is not accompanied by intimidation, persuasion, compulsion, or threats, and does not violate the law, security, or public order. It is critical to prioritize the collegial Regional Leadership Coordination Forum, which consists of the head of the Regional House of Representatives, the head of the police, the head of the prosecutor's office, and the head of the regional unit of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia in the region, as outlined in Article 1 Point 18 of the Regional Government Law. According to Regional Government Law Article 25 Paragraph 1 Letter C, the subject of religious unity is the responsibility of FKUB (Religious Communication Forum). The regional head is helped by a regional secretariat/staff, in addition to the Regional Leadership Coordination Forum, FKUB, according to Article 209 paragraph (1) and (2) letter of the Regional Government Law.

Conclusion

Promoting religious harmony through the Religious Harmony Forum is essential in anticipation of the politicization of religion in Indonesia. However, the forum has been criticized for allowing adherents of the majority religion to have veto power over the construction of houses of worship of minority religions, thus hampering the religious freedom rights of minority religious groups in Indonesia. There are growing concerns about the role of religion, particularly Islam, in Indonesia's largely democratic society. The interfaith movement also struggles with the growing strength of radical groups on the political scene in Indonesia, especially by justifying the politicization of religion. Meanwhile, the Religious Harmony Forum is being improvised from political and legal perspectives so that it does not merely exist as a formal process but has a vital role in maintaining religious harmony in Indonesia that can be stabilized through political and legal approaches.

It is essential to encourage the Draft Law on Religious Harmony to be ratified soon to further strengthen the existence of the Religious Harmony Forum in maintaining religious harmony in Indonesia, such as the destruction of places of worship, the demolition of other religions, or even religious wars. This anticipation results from the network of religious harmony forums (FKUB), by routinely conducting studies on the value of interfaith tolerance or even conferences on religious moderation. Verbal communication used by FKUB through books, journals, and newspapers includes invitations and appeals to obey government regulations on the principles of religious harmony and invitations and appeals not to cause disturbances and disputes. FKUB will identify people it wants to reach with its initiatives to promote peace and tolerance, such as discussions with interfaith leaders, female role models, those in charge of places of worship, religious instructors, and religious leaders.

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