Religious Harmony and Identity Politics in Indonesia's Electoral Democracy

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Abstract: *This research is driven by the increasing strength of religion-based identity politics in Indonesia's post-reform electoral democracy, which creates a dilemma between legitimate political competition and threats to interfaith harmony. The problem formulation of this study concerns how identity politics challenges religious harmony and to what extent harmony can serve as an instrument to reduce polarization and reinforce democratic consolidation. The research questions focus on two main aspects: (1) how the dynamics of harmony are tested by the exploitation of religious issues within electoral contests, and (2) how harmonization strategies can function as social capital in maintaining democratic stability. Using a qualitative approach with a juridical-normative and socio-political framework, this study relies on a literature review involving laws and regulations, court decisions, official state documents, and national and international academic works, combined with content analysis of religiously nuanced political narratives in media and public discourse. The findings indicate that harmony is not a natural social condition but a socio-political construction that is vulnerable to instrumentalization by electoral interests. FKUB and harmony-related regulations tend to remain normative and less effective in the absence of substantive justice. Nonetheless, harmony still holds potential as strategic capital for democracy if it is developed through a framework of justice, religious political literacy, and inclusive democratic governance.*

Keywords*: Democratic Consolidation; Electoral Democracy; Identity Politics; Interfaith Harmony; Religious Polarization.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious harmony remains one of the central pillars in maintaining the stability of Indonesia's electoral democracy, especially in the midst of the growing use of religion as a political instrument. As a nation built upon religious and cultural pluralism, Indonesia continues to face challenges in sustaining peaceful relations among religious communities. Political dynamics in the post-reform period opened wider democratic space and expanded civil liberties, yet at the same time gave rise to a new phenomenon: the strengthening of religion-based identity politics in electoral competition.

This condition was clearly reflected during several electoral events, most notably the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which is often regarded as a turning point in the politicization of religion in Indonesia. Religious narratives that were brought into the public arena at that time were not limited to moral persuasion but developed into tools for political delegitimization and mass mobilization. The emergence of dichotomies such as "us" versus "them" became a trigger for horizontal tension that continued even after the election was over (Mietzner M. , 2015). A similar pattern resurfaced in the 2019 Election, indicating that identity politics has become a recurring feature within Indonesia's political landscape.

Such a reality illustrates the dilemma faced by Indonesia's electoral democracy. On one hand, identity is a legitimate part of democratic expression because every citizen has the right to voice their political aspirations. However, when religious identity is transformed into a political weapon through exclusive narratives and hostility, it carries the risk of undermining interfaith harmony and weakening democratic consolidation. In this context, harmony is not merely a normative slogan but becomes a crucial socio-political instrument in ensuring democratic sustainability.

The Indonesian state has attempted to institutionalize interfaith harmony through various regulations and policies. One of the most concrete institutional forms is the establishment of the Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB) which is tasked with preventing conflict and facilitating interfaith communication. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of FKUB in managing potential conflicts is often questioned. This is due to its limited authority, strong dependence on local political arrangements, and the tendency for harmony to be treated procedurally rather than substantively based on justice and equality (Faqih, 2021).

Therefore, studying the relationship between identity politics and harmony is not only important but also urgent, given growing political fragmentation. This research departs from the argument that harmony is not a natural social condition that emerges spontaneously but is a socio-political construction that is continuously negotiated amid electoral dynamics. Harmony can thus function not only as a moral value but also as strategic capital to curb excessive political polarization.

This research focuses on two main issues. First, how the dynamics of interfaith harmony are tested through the use of religious issues in electoral contests. Second, how harmonization strategies can play a role as political capital in maintaining democratic stability. These two questions are important because they concern the dialectical relationship between social morality and electoral political practices. Harmony, often perceived as a static condition, is in reality a social process that is constantly negotiated and subject to change due to short-term political interests.

The novelty of this research lies in its attempt to connect two fields of study that have often operated independently: the study of interfaith harmony in the social sciences and the study of identity politics in political science. This research not only examines the conceptual relationship between the two but also emphasizes the temporal dimension of their dynamics. Both harmony and identity politics are understood not as static entities, but as socio-political processes that continuously transform throughout the election cycle, from pre-campaign, through the campaign period, and after the election.

This approach allows this research to identify moments of crisis when harmony is most vulnerable due to political contestation. Through this perspective, this research also provides space for formulating more appropriate and equitable policy interventions to maintain democratic stability. Thus, this study aims not only to address the problem but also to offer a strategic perspective on how harmony can serve as socio-political capital in strengthening democracy.

Therefore, this research is expected to not only provide empirical contributions to understanding the relationship between identity politics and interfaith harmony, but also provide theoretical insights into the discourse on democratic consolidation in Indonesia. If harmony can serve as a buffer against the negative impacts of identity politics, then it has the potential to become the foundation for a more substantive democracy. Conversely, if harmony is co-opted by the interests of exclusive identity politics, then a more inclusive reconstruction of multicultural policies is needed to ensure justice for all citizens within the framework of a democratic state.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Identity Politics in Electoral Democracy

Conceptually, identity politics refers to the mobilization of political support based on shared primordial identities such as religion, ethnicity, or race. From Manuel Castells' perspective, identity can be a source of collective meaning and legitimacy, especially when a group feels threatened or marginalized (Castells, 1997). Identity then functions as a tool of resistance and legitimacy of power.

However, in electoral democracy, identity is not simply a cultural expression, but a strategy of political mobilization. Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani show that in the Indonesian context, religion can indeed provide certain electoral advantages, but its effects are highly contextual and influenced by economic issues and perceptions of candidate performance (Thomas B. Pepinsky, 2009). This means that the assumption that identity politics is always determinant needs to be criticized.

From the perspective of Henri Tajfel's social identity theory, the politicization of religion operates through three mechanisms: categorization (the "us-them" divide), identification (group loyalty), and social comparison (affirmation of group superiority) (Tajfel, 1982). When these mechanisms enter electoral contestation, polarization becomes a logical consequence.

However, there is an implicit assumption that needs to be tested: is religious identity always destructive? In some cases, identity actually strengthens political participation and internal community cohesion. Therefore, identity politics must be understood as an ambivalent phenomenon it has the potential to strengthen participatory democracy while simultaneously eroding pluralism.

Interfaith Harmony as a Socio-Political Construct

Harmony is often understood as a natural state of harmony. However, theoretically, harmony is a socio-political construct formed through norms, regulations, and practices of social interaction.

Bhikhu Parekh emphasized that in a multicultural society, harmony is only possible through equal recognition of differences, not merely passive tolerance (Parekh, 2002). Thus, harmony is not synonymous with the absence of conflict, but rather a process of managing differences fairly.

In the Indonesian context, harmony is also institutionalized through state policies such as the establishment of the FKUB (Regional Forum for Reconciliation). However, as criticized in the literature on harmony policies, institutionalization without substantive justice can produce "pseudo-harmony," a fragile stability built on short-term political compromise.

John Rawls emphasized that justice as fairness is the foundation of legitimacy in a pluralistic society (Rawls, 1971). Without guarantees of equal justice for minority groups, harmony becomes little more than a normative slogan. This is where the relationship between harmony and democracy becomes crucial.

Social Capital and Democratic Consolidation

To understand the strategic function of harmony, the theory of social capital is essential. Robert Putnam defines social capital as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000). Within this framework, interfaith harmony can be positioned as a form of bridging social capital that expands trust across groups.

James Coleman adds that trust reduces social transaction costs and accelerates collective coordination (Coleman, 1990). In electoral democracies, the level of trust between groups determines acceptance of election results and post-contest stability.

However, Francis Fukuyama warns that social capital can also be exclusive (bonding capital), benefiting only internal groups and potentially closing off external parties (Fukuyama, 1995). If harmony occurs only within a particular religious group without interfaith bridges, then it does not contribute to democratic consolidation.

Larry Diamond emphasized that consolidated democracy is not just about electoral procedures, but the internalization of democratic values in political culture (Diamond, 1999). Linz and Stepan even stipulate that no significant actor attempts to replace the democratic system with a non-democratic one.[10] In this context, harmony serves as a buffer against identity radicalization that could threaten democratic legitimacy.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

To examine these issues, this research uses a qualitative approach with a juridical-normative and socio-political analytical framework. The juridical-normative approach is used to examine the legal basis for religious freedom, the protection of minority groups, and the legal provisions governing the implementation of elections. Meanwhile, the socio-political approach is used to understand the practice of identity politics in society and how religious symbols and narratives are exploited for electoral gain.

The data in this study were obtained through a literature review that included an analysis of laws and regulations, court decisions, official state documents, and national and international scientific literature relevant to the research theme. Furthermore, this study conducted a content analysis of religiously tinged political narratives in the mass media and public discourse. This method was used to explore the construction of religious discourse in electoral politics and its impact on social relations between religious groups.

This research is not only descriptive but also analytical, integrating theoretical considerations on identity politics, social capital, and democratic consolidation. Through this analysis, this study seeks to explain how harmony is managed, debated, and utilized in Indonesia's post-reform electoral political space.

Discussion I

Patterns of Interreligious Harmony and the History of Identity Politics in Indonesia

Religious harmony has been a key foundation of Indonesia's journey since independence. As a nation of over 270 million people with diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, Indonesia faces significant challenges in maintaining social and political stability. Religious pluralism is not merely a sociological reality but also a political condition that requires careful management to prevent conflict. *Pancasila*, particularly its first principle, "Belief in the One and Only God," affirms the state's recognition of religions and beliefs and serves as a philosophical foundation for building harmony. However, history demonstrates that

harmony is not a static state, but rather a constant tension between national commitment and the political interests of power.

In the context of electoral democracy, religious harmony is ambivalent. On one hand, harmony serves as social capital that strengthens the state's legitimacy and the consolidation of democracy. A harmonious society is more easily able to reach consensus, reduces the potential for conflict, and increases the chances of achieving political stability. However, on the other hand, harmony is often sacrificed for short-term electoral gains. The politicization of religion in campaigns, the use of ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (*SARA*) to attack political opponents, and the mobilization of religiously motivated masses are all real practices that erode social harmony. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election was a turning point, clearly demonstrating how religious issues are exploited extensively for electoral political gain.

Religious identity politics in Indonesia is not a new phenomenon. Since the early formulation of the state constitution, religion has been a crucial factor in political dynamics. The debate over the 1945 Jakarta Charter demonstrated how Islamic groups sought to include the obligation to adhere to Islamic law for their adherents, while others rejected it on grounds of inclusivity. A political compromise ultimately resulted in the removal of seven words from the Jakarta Charter, which is still considered a crucial moment in Indonesian national history.

During the Old Order, Islamic parties such as Masyumi and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) played a significant role in the national political landscape. However, internal fragmentation and tensions with nationalist groups often hampered the solidarity of Muslims in pursuing their political aspirations. During the New Order era, political expression of religion was suppressed through the *Pancasila* single principle policy. This policy reduced the intensity of open conflict but, at the same time, gave rise to latent dynamics. Religious expression in the public sphere was reduced but never completely eliminated. When freedom of expression reopened after the 1998 reforms, religious identity once again became a key instrument in electoral politics (Noer, 1987).

The reform era marked a new phase in the relationship between religion, identity, and democracy. Amendments to the 1945 Constitution opened up broad space for freedom of association, assembly, and expression. This expanded political participation while increasing the risk of identity fragmentation. Religious organizations gained greater space to express their political views. The politicization of religion became an effective strategy for mass mobilization, particularly in urban areas with high levels of electoral competition.

Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner assert that post-reform religious populist politics poses a serious threat to the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia (Mietzner, 2019). In many cases, religion is used as an exclusive campaign tool to delegitimize political opponents and strengthen ties with the majority group. This not only creates injustice for minority groups but also undermines the foundations of harmony that have been built since the dawn of independence.

However, religion-based identity politics also has an ambivalent side. In certain contexts, religious identity can strengthen social solidarity and lend moral legitimacy to candidates. In strong religious communities, the religious affinity between candidates and voters can serve as a democratically legitimate political glue. Nurjanah, for example, emphasizes that harmony in the context of identity politics should be understood not merely as passive tolerance, but as an active effort to build bridges of communication amidst differences (Nurjanah, 2021).

The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election was the most prominent laboratory for religion-based identity politics in contemporary Indonesian history. Religious issues were massively politicized to attack the incumbent, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (*Ahok*), who is ethnically Chinese and Christian. His speech in the Thousand Islands was distorted and used as political ammunition to mobilize the masses in large demonstrations, including the 212 rally, which drew hundreds of thousands of people in Jakarta.

This phenomenon had two major consequences. First, it demonstrated how effective religious issues can be in shifting the electoral preferences of urban communities. Second, it gave rise to sharp social polarization between the Muslim majority and minority groups. This polarization did not stop with the electoral momentum but continued in the form of social distrust, political segregation, and divisions on social media.

Burhani calls this event the birth of "Islamic populist politics" in Indonesia, the impact of which is still felt today (Burhani, 2018). The political polarization of 2017 then spread to the 2019 elections, where religious issues once again became a key campaign tool. Social media amplified this polarization through hoaxes, hate speech, and exclusive narratives that divided society.

The phenomenon of religious identity politics in Indonesia demonstrates that religious harmony cannot be considered a natural state that will always exist. Instead, harmony is a social and political construct vulnerable to disruption by powerful interests. History shows that religion can always be used as a political instrument, both to strengthen state legitimacy and to suppress political opponents.

From the perspective of social identity theory, the politicization of religion operates through three mechanisms: categorization (dividing society into "us" and "them"), identification (strengthening loyalty to one's own group), and comparison (comparing one's own group's superiority with the inferiority of others) (Tajfel, 1982). When these mechanisms are used in the electoral arena, harmony easily shifts into polarization.

Thus, the history of identity politics in Indonesia demonstrates a recurring cycle, from the compromise of the Jakarta Charter, to the repression of the New Order, to the post-reform revival. Religious harmony is not a legacy to be taken for granted, but must be continually fought for in every phase of politics.

Discussion II

Harmony as Socio-Political Capital and an Instrument for Democratic Consolidation

Religious harmony in Indonesia cannot be understood solely as a moral value or social ethics, but rather as a highly strategic socio-political capital in strengthening democratic consolidation. In this context, harmony functions as a social glue that enables the continuation of peaceful political interactions, prevents horizontal conflict, and strengthens the legitimacy of the political system. Robert Putnam defines social capital as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Putnam, 2000). If interfaith harmony is viewed as a form of social capital, then it serves as a primary foundation for Indonesia's pluralistic democracy.

Religious harmony builds social trust between groups of different religions, ethnicities, and political orientations. James Coleman emphasized that trust in social capital enables social actors to make decisions more quickly because the risk of suspicion is reduced (Coleman, 1990). In an electoral democracy, cross-group trust broadens the basis for healthy political communication, reduces the social costs of conflict, and affirms a shared commitment to the principles of nationalism. Without social trust, electoral mechanisms are vulnerable to disruption by suspicion and polarization.

The perspective of identity politics shows that religion can be a double-edged sword. Manuel Castells explains that identity politics emerges when certain groups build solidarity based on shared identity in response to external pressure or marginalization (Castells, 1997). In Indonesia, religious identity can function as bonding capital that strengthens internal solidarity, but if left unmanaged, it can lead to social segregation. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election demonstrated how identity politics can destabilize harmony. SARA issues were used to attack specific candidates, spark large demonstrations, and exacerbate the

gap between the Muslim majority and minority groups. The impact is still felt today through increasing distrust and social polarization, including in the digital space. Burhani calls this event the birth of "Islamic populist politics" in Indonesia, with long-term consequences for democracy (Burhani, 2018).

Similar polarization also emerged in the 2019 election. Religious issues became a campaign tool, while social media amplified polarization through hoaxes and hate speech. This demonstrates how identity politics in the digital era is increasingly complex and has direct implications for harmony. Francis Fukuyama emphasized that social capital is not always inclusive (Fukuyama, 1995). It can manifest in the form of bonding social capital that benefits internal groups but risks excluding external parties. In Indonesia, inclusive harmony (bridging social capital) is evident in the practice of interfaith mutual cooperation, solidarity in the face of disasters, or interfaith forums such as the FKUB. Conversely, exclusive harmony can give rise to segregation, where solidarity applies only within the group, while external relations remain fragile.

Democratic consolidation requires broad acceptance of political rules, respect for pluralism, and a willingness to resolve conflicts peacefully. Larry Diamond emphasized that democratic consolidation does not stop at electoral procedures but also requires the internalization of democratic values within the political culture (Diamond, 1999). In Indonesia, harmony serves as a cultural instrument that underpins substantive democracy: it reduces the risk of violence, expands political inclusion, and strengthens the legitimacy of election results.

Linz and Stepan added the parameter that democracy is consolidated when no significant actors attempt to replace the democratic regime with a non-democratic system (Stepan, 1996). If harmony is disturbed, there is a risk of intolerant actors rejecting pluralism and promoting religious exclusivism in politics. At this point, harmony plays a dual role: as a conflict management mechanism and a bulwark against the erosion of democratic values.

Obstacles to democratic consolidation in Indonesia are evident in religious-based political polarization, hate speech, and hoaxes on social media. The 2019 election, for example, demonstrated how religious issues were used to attack candidates, thus strengthening the politics of othering. Yet, the constitution, through Article 29 of the 1945 Constitution, guarantees freedom of religion, and Article 1 paragraph (2) affirms the sovereignty of the people. Without harmony, these constitutional guarantees become merely symbolic norms without any applicability.

Harmony as social capital cannot be left to develop naturally. The state must be present through regulations and public policies. Constitutional Court Decision No. 140/PUU-

VII/2009 concerning Blasphemy emphasized the importance of maintaining harmony, despite criticism for its potential to limit freedom of expression. This dilemma demonstrates the complex role of the state: on the one hand, protecting harmony, while on the other, guaranteeing civil liberties.

Civil society plays a crucial role in strengthening harmony from the bottom up. Religious organizations, non-governmental organizations, and interfaith forums such as the FKUB can be key actors in maintaining harmony. The Gusdurian Movement or the Inclusive Network (*Jaringan Inklusi*) are examples of how civil society can broaden the basis of substantive democracy. However, if civil society is caught up in the polarization of electoral politics, harmony can be reduced to an instrument of short-term interests.

Authentic harmony must be built on substantive justice, not merely a false sense of harmony. John Rawls emphasized that justice is fairness, namely equal treatment for all citizens, including religious minorities (Rawls, 1971). If harmony is understood only as the absence of conflict, it becomes fragile and easily collapses when political interests change. Harmony must be positioned as an instrument of democratization that ensures the full participation of all citizens.

From a political economy perspective, harmony also supports economic stability. Foreign and domestic investors are highly sensitive to the risk of social conflict. Harmony creates a climate conducive to long-term development. Within the framework of *Golden Indonesia 2045*, social harmony is a prerequisite for optimizing the demographic bonus. Without harmony, demographic potential can become a burden due to horizontal conflict.

Furthermore, harmony also strengthens national integration. With more than 270 million people and hundreds of ethnic and religious groups, harmony is a prerequisite for preventing political fragmentation. In the context of regional autonomy, well-managed harmony ensures that decentralization does not turn into an arena for identity conflict. It serves as a glue that allows pluralism to coexist with local democracy.

Another challenge is the instrumentalization of religion by political elites. Religious identity is often used for electoral mobilization. On the one hand, this is legitimate in a democracy; however, if manipulated irresponsibly, it can undermine harmony. Therefore, there is a need for religious political literacy that encourages the public to be critical of the exploitation of religious symbols in practical politics.

Civic education and interfaith religious literacy are important long-term instruments. Pancasila education, the history of tolerance in Indonesia, and interfaith dialogue in schools

and universities can strengthen democratic culture. If harmony is cultivated from an early age, future generations will be more resilient to exclusive identity politics.

Ultimately, harmony as socio-political capital is not merely rhetoric, but a real instrument for democratic consolidation. It maintains pluralism, strengthens political legitimacy, reduces the potential for conflict, and opens up space for inclusion. Without harmony, Indonesian democracy will be fragile, easily reduced to a polarizing electoral formality. Conversely, with true harmony, substantive democracy can grow solidly as a political legacy for future generations.

Discussion III

Strategies for Strengthening Religious Harmony in Indonesia's Electoral Democracy

Religious harmony in the context of Indonesia's electoral democracy faces increasingly complex challenges. The globalization of information, political polarization, and the growing use of identity politics based on religion pose serious risks to social cohesion. In this situation, harmony cannot be left to develop naturally; it must instead be cultivated through comprehensive strategies encompassing regulatory, cultural, structural, and participatory dimensions.

The legal framework serves as the primary foundation for safeguarding harmony. Indonesia has several regulations relevant to this issue, such as (1) the 1945 Constitution, Article 29(2), which guarantees freedom of religion; (2) Law No. 7 of 2017 on Elections, which prohibits campaigns based on ethnicity, religion, race, or intergroup relations (SARA); and (3) Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights, which affirms every individual's right to religious freedom. However, the implementation of these regulations remains weak. For example, the ban on SARA-based campaigns in the Election Law is often violated without strict sanctions. Strengthening the regulatory dimension thus requires several measures: (a) consistent law enforcement, with Bawaslu and KPU adopting stricter actions against religious-based campaign violations; administrative and criminal sanctions should be applied without discrimination; (b) revising ambiguous regulations, such as the Blasphemy Law, which often generates controversy for enabling criminalization revisions should prioritize conflict prevention rather than restricting freedom of expression; (c) protecting minorities, by reforming discriminatory regulations such as the 2006 Joint Ministerial Decree on houses of worship. The Constitutional Court's Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016, which strengthened civil rights for adherents of local religions, represents a positive step that should be expanded.

Education plays a vital role in fostering a culture of tolerance. Key cultural strategies include (1) integrating multicultural education into curricula, ensuring that civic education (PKN) and religious education emphasize pluralism, tolerance, and national values; (2) strengthening religious moderation, a program mainstreamed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs since 2019 with four indicators is commitment to nationalism, tolerance, anti-violence, and accommodation of local culture. This initiative should be broadened beyond civil servants to schools, pesantren, and faith-based communities; (3) promoting digital literacy and countering hoaxes, as much of the polarization is fueled by misinformation on social media. Initiatives such as Cek Fakta and Mafindo should receive broader support.

Institutional engineering within the political system is also necessary. Strategic measures include (a) designing an inclusive party system, where political parties recruit cadres across religious groups and avoid relying on religious identity as the primary basis for mobilization. Studies (e.g. Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani) show that religious identity's influence is moderated by economic messaging in campaign (Thomas B. Pepinsky, 2009); (b) revitalizing the Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB), which is often perceived as symbolic FKUB must evolve into an effective dialogue space that includes youth, women, and minority representatives; (c) enhancing inter-agency collaboration, where KPU, Bawaslu, the Police, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and Komnas HAM coordinate more effectively to prevent exclusive identity politics. At present, coordination remains largely sectoral.

Civil society also plays a crucial role in sustaining harmony. Participatory strategies include (1) local interfaith dialogue, involving religious leaders, youth, and community organizations to reduce prejudice. Empirical studies suggest that direct intergroup interaction significantly lowers intolerance (Mujani, 2019); (2) peace-based community initiatives, such as Sabang Merauke (interfaith student exchanges) and Peace Generation, which demonstrate that harmony can be nurtured through shared experiences rather than mere discourse; (3) empowering women and youth, as women often serve as agents of peace in families and communities, while youth are key actors in the digital sphere. Strengthening both groups provides effective means for building sustainable harmony.

Harmony cannot be achieved if the state remains reactive, responding only after conflicts erupt. Thus, an early warning system is necessary to detect potential religion-based conflicts before escalation occurs. Such a system would be vital in safeguarding social stability and strengthening electoral democracy. Monitoring social media is a crucial component of this system, as online platforms often serve as arenas for hate speech, intolerant narratives, and

religiously charged provocations. Through careful, technology-based monitoring, the state can identify online discourse that threatens to spark horizontal conflict.

In addition to digital monitoring, conflict-prone area mapping must be conducted periodically. The Ministry of Home Affairs and FKUB can identify regions with a history of worship-related disputes or interreligious intolerance. Such mapping enables preventive state intervention before tensions escalate. Another preventive measure is rapid local mediation, facilitated by religious leaders, traditional figures, and local communities. Quick mediation ensures disputes are resolved peacefully without escalating to security-force interventions, which often exacerbate tensions. A notable example is in Yogyakarta, where the National Integration Forum (FPK) operates at the village level, functioning as both a dialogue platform and early warning mechanism (Yogyakarta, 2025).

Beyond prevention, harmony must be linked to Indonesia's long-term development agenda. The Indonesia Emas 2045 vision places social stability as a prerequisite for economic progress and innovation. The demographic dividend can become a blessing only if society remains peaceful and cohesive; otherwise, it risks becoming a burden through horizontal conflicts. From a development perspective, harmony is a long-term investment. It serves as political capital for sustaining inclusive democracy, social capital for strengthening community collaboration, and economic capital by fostering a conducive investment climate. Thus, harmony's multidimensional roles cannot be overlooked.

Nevertheless, there are risks if harmony is reduced to mere "pseudo-harmony" that suppresses differences without embracing genuine diversity. As Bhikhu Parekh argues in *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, pluralism requires equal recognition of differences rather than mere tolerance (Parekh, 2002). Authentic harmony can only be achieved when grounded in justice, equality, and participation for all religious groups. Accordingly, strategies to strengthen religious harmony in Indonesia's electoral democracy must transcend slogans and symbols. Harmony should be realized as the foundation of substantive democracy, enabling dialogue, rejecting discrimination, and ensuring full participation of all citizens in political life. Only then can harmony provide a solid basis for a sustainable democratic order.

Discussion IV

The Long-Term Prospects of Religious Harmony and Electoral Democracy in Indonesia

Religious harmony in the context of Indonesia's electoral democracy holds strategic significance that cannot be ignored. As a multicultural nation with over 1,300 ethnic groups and six official religions, socio-political stability can only be achieved through intergroup

harmony. The long-term prospects for this harmony will determine the extent to which Indonesian democracy can survive as an inclusive, stable, and responsive political system to the needs of the people.

The first long-term challenge is the increasing polarization of religion-based politics. The 2014 and 2019 elections demonstrated how religious sentiment was used to strengthen the electoral base of certain candidates. This type of polarization has the potential to create social segregation that is difficult to reverse. If not managed wisely, the residue of this identity conflict could erode public trust in democracy (Mietzner, 2019).

Second, the development of digital technology will increasingly influence the future landscape of harmony. Social media platforms open up space for the democratization of information, but also facilitate the spread of hoaxes, hate speech, and religion-based disinformation. These digital challenges make the prospects for harmony highly dependent on citizens' digital literacy and the state's capacity to regulate the digital space without stifling freedom of expression.

Third, economic inequality is also a crucial factor intertwined with the issue of harmony. Economically marginalized groups are more vulnerable to the politicization of identity (Hadiz, 2010). Therefore, the prospects for harmony cannot be separated from the agenda of equitable development. Democracy that only serves certain groups will open up space for dissatisfaction that can easily be mobilized through religious issues.

Nevertheless, there are strategic opportunities that can strengthen the prospects for long-term harmony. One is the historical experience of the Indonesian nation, which successfully maintained Pancasila as a basic consensus. The values of Pancasila, which emphasize unity in diversity, can serve as an ideological anchor in addressing the dynamics of identity politics (Latif, 2011). Pancasila is not merely a symbol, but a normative framework that binds all political actors within the framework of national harmony.

Furthermore, the position of institutions such as the Constitutional Court (MK) and the General Elections Commission (KPU) can strengthen inclusive electoral democracy. Constitutional Court Decision No. 135/PUU-XXII/2024, for example, emphasized the importance of fair and proportional election design. Consistent electoral law enforcement will reduce the opportunity for religious identity manipulation for short-term political gain.

The future democratic reform agenda must emphasize strengthening the role of civil society institutions in maintaining harmony. Religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah possess significant social capital to promote tolerance and erode

extremism. By strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations, harmony can be maintained from the bottom up, not simply from the top down from the state.

From a long-term development perspective, harmony must be linked to the vision of Golden Indonesia 2045. Solid harmony will create a stable climate for economic growth, investment, and technological innovation. Without harmony, the demographic bonus, which should be an advantage, can instead turn into a demographic disaster in the form of horizontal conflict and political instability (Bappenas, 2022).

Future scenarios for harmony can be projected in three models. First, an optimistic scenario in which harmony is strengthened through the integration of tolerance values into the education system, inclusive political reform, and economic equality. Second, a moderate scenario, where harmony is maintained but remains vulnerable to incidental conflict due to the politicization of religion. Third, a pessimistic scenario, where harmony weakens as identity polarization continues to be exacerbated by digital media and social injustice.

To prevent this pessimistic scenario, the state needs to strengthen its early warning system for religious-based conflicts. This approach emphasizes not only post-conflict response but also early detection of potential conflicts (Mulia, 2013). A combination of big data technology, social mapping, and the role of local religious leaders can create a sustainable model for managing harmony.

In addition to a preventive approach, multicultural citizenship education must be strengthened. This type of education aims to instill an understanding that religious differences are a social fact that cannot be eliminated but must be managed. The younger generation, as the main actors in Indonesia 2045, needs to be equipped with skills in dialogue, tolerance, and conflict resolution to prevent democracy from becoming mired in identity segregation.

Normative reflection is also crucial to remind us that harmony is not an end in itself, but rather an instrument for realizing social justice. Harmony that emphasizes only harmony without justice will be fragile and its legitimacy easily questioned. Therefore, the prospects for harmony must always be linked to the state's efforts to fulfill the basic rights of citizens without discrimination.

Within the framework of electoral democracy, the long-term prospects for harmony also depend on how the political system provides space for fair representation. The role of the Regional Representative Council (DPD), for example, can be strengthened to ensure greater representation of regions and minority groups. Inclusive representation is a structural mechanism for fostering long-term harmony.

Ultimately, the prospects for religious harmony in Indonesia's electoral democracy will always be a tug-of-war between risks and opportunities. If democracy can be managed inclusively, harmony can be a key asset towards a Golden Indonesia 2045. However, if democracy continues to be reduced to narrow identity contests, harmony has the potential to be fragile, and Indonesia's future could be threatened by social fragmentation.

Therefore, harmony must be treated as a cross-sectoral national agenda. It is not solely the domain of the Ministry of Religious Affairs or the FKUB, but also the responsibility of political institutions, educational institutions, civil society, and every citizen (Ahmad, 2021). The long-term prospects for harmony and electoral democracy will be determined by the collective commitment of the Indonesian people to maintaining diversity as a strength, not a source of division.

4. CONCLUSION

From this research description, it can be concluded that religious harmony in Indonesia is not a static condition, but rather a socio-political construct that is constantly renegotiated in the dynamics of electoral democracy. Religious-based identity politics has been shown to have ambivalence: on the one hand, it strengthens internal solidarity, but on the other hand, it has the potential to cause sharp social polarization, as seen in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2019 general election. This shows that harmony cannot be seen as something natural, but must be maintained through regulations, public policies, and the active participation of civil society.

Harmony within the framework of socio-political capital functions as a social glue that supports the consolidation of democracy, strengthens trust across groups, and reduces the potential for horizontal conflict. However, harmony can only play an effective role if it is built on substantive justice and inclusivity, not just a false harmony. The main challenges come from the politicization of religion, the limitations of institutions such as the FKUB, and the weak political literacy of the public regarding the exploitation of religious symbols.

Based on these findings, there are several practical implications that need to be considered in efforts to strengthen harmony as socio-political capital and an instrument for democratic consolidation. First, strengthening equitable regulations is necessary. Revisions to regulations such as the Blasphemy Law and the Mass Organizations Law are urgent to prevent them from being open to multiple interpretations and potentially becoming tools of repression. These regulations should be directed at guaranteeing religious freedom while also serving as a

mechanism to prevent intolerance, so that the law truly protects all citizens without discrimination.

Second, the institution of the Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB) needs substantial reform. To date, the FKUB's existence has often been seen as merely symbolic and ineffective in resolving grassroots conflicts. In fact, the FKUB should act as a mediator capable of facilitating interfaith dialogue at the local level and providing a deliberative space for communities to seek peaceful solutions to emerging differences.

Third, interfaith civic education must be strengthened from an early age. School and university curricula need to systematically instill the values of pluralism, tolerance, and justice, for example through applicable Pancasila Education and interfaith dialogue involving students from diverse backgrounds. In this way, the younger generation can grow with an inclusive national perspective and the capacity to navigate the dynamics of identity politics.

Fourth, strengthening the role of civil society and improving digital literacy are key. Civil society organizations must be positioned as strategic actors capable of countering intolerant narratives and initiating intergroup dialogue. In the digital context, political and media literacy are essential to prevent society from becoming easily trapped in identity echo chambers and falling victim to the spread of divisive hate speech and hoaxes.

Fifth, the state must act as a facilitator of religious moderation, not merely a repressive regulator. The Ministry of Religious Affairs, the National Agency for the Assessment and Application of Information (BPIP), and the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) need to focus on designing preventive and proactive policies to maintain social harmony. Religious moderation must be translated into concrete programs that build trust across groups, strengthen national solidarity, and ensure that harmony is not merely a moral slogan but a socio-political reality that underpins democracy.

With these steps, harmony can function not only as a tool to mitigate conflict but also as an instrument of democratization that ensures every citizen, regardless of religion, can fully participate in political life. This will strengthen the consolidation of Indonesian democracy while maintaining the sustainability of pluralism.

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