

CHALLENGES OF RELIGION AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN INDONESIA: THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Abstract

The relationship between religion and society in Indonesia is deeply embedded in the daily lives of its citizens, influencing social interactions, political participation, and cultural dynamics. This interconnection encourages active cooperation and mutual understanding between religious groups, fostering an environment of shared aspirations. However, in the contemporary context, the intersection of religion and politics has become increasingly aligned with the political identity of the population, often complicating interfaith relations. This study explores the political identity of Indonesian citizens in relation to their religious affiliations, emphasizing how these identities shape public interactions and influence societal harmony. Using a qualitative approach with literature-based data, this research analyzes how identity politics in Indonesia is articulated and expressed in a manner that could potentially disrupt the inter-religious relationships established over time. The findings suggest that the expression of identity politics remains immature and poorly executed, which threatens the interfaith harmony that Indonesia has long nurtured. Therefore, identity politics must be approached and articulated in alignment with universal principles and the common good to ensure peaceful coexistence and national unity.

Keywords: *Identity Politics; Interfaith Harmony; Religious Relations*

A. Introduction

The issue of inter-religious relations is deeply rooted in human life, as human beings are inherently created in a diverse and multicultural manner by the Almighty. This diversity requires humans to interact, communicate, and engage in relationships with individuals from different religious backgrounds. In Islamic terms, this is understood as fostering *ukhuwwah* (brotherhood) and maintaining respectful relationships between religious communities. The Creator's purpose behind such diversity is to encourage humans to understand, complement, and support one another, not to engage in conflict or destruction.

In this context, the thought of the Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldun is relevant, where he stated, "it is impossible, humans have to cooperate with each other." He emphasized that humanity would face difficulty if it did not work together. However, if humans collaborate, the wisdom of the Creator will unfold, ensuring the sustainability of human life and the preservation of the human species (Hidayat, 2019). Similarly, Boisard (1980) echoed the idea that humanity must support and cooperate with one another to preserve its existence. He

argued that only through collaboration and mutual support can humanity ensure its security and benefit.

Thus, humans must actively, constructively, and creatively engage in interreligious interactions by fostering dialogue, building relationships, and contributing to the development of mutual understanding. Although there is a growing body of literature that emphasizes the importance of interreligious cooperation and dialogue, there exists a noticeable gap in the practical application of these principles in the context of modern identity politics in Indonesia. Previous studies, such as those by Hidayat (2019) and Boisard (1980), have argued for the universal necessity of cooperation, but they do not adequately address the specific challenges and dynamics of interfaith relations in politically charged environments.

While there is extensive discussion on the general importance of interreligious cooperation, there is insufficient exploration of how identity politics in contemporary Indonesia impacts these relationships. Identity politics has become increasingly intertwined with religious identities, influencing social interactions and political alignments in ways that may either enhance or undermine interfaith harmony. Although scholars like Ibn Khaldun and Boisard advocate for cooperation, there is a lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework that specifically addresses how religious cooperation can be practically achieved within a political and pluralistic society such as Indonesia. This gap is critical as political ideologies often intersect with religious beliefs, complicating the process of fostering genuine interfaith dialogue and understanding.

Most of the existing literature focuses on philosophical discussions of interreligious relations rather than providing empirical data on how these ideas are implemented in practice in diverse societies like Indonesia. The dynamics of religion-based identity politics have not been sufficiently studied in relation to real-world examples of interfaith dialogue, cooperation, or conflict, especially in the context of Indonesian society where religious and political identities are often closely tied.

Illustration of soft and inexplicable air. For every action taken, the air will overflow to ward off flooding and ward off harm, if not loss, to humans themselves. The metaphor conveys the idea that interreligious bonds are a reality that will always be imagined or exist in all aspects of human life. Given that humans are social creatures, this condition certainly requires individuals and societies to be open and willing to accept and respect all kinds of diversity (*son politicon*). However, in reality, the presence of interreligious interaction actually traps people in their own aspirations, so they ignore the aspirations of others and other groups (Identitas et al., 2022).

In the contemporary era, identity politics has emerged as a significant factor in social and political dynamics. This phenomenon can be viewed as a social reinforcement of political identification, where various aspects of identity – such as race, religion, ethnicity, and group affiliation – become central to the political discourse. Richard Thomson Ford (2018) argues that while the issue of identity politics is not new, its implications have become

more pronounced in recent times. The term "identity politics" has a narrower connotation today, as it increasingly emphasizes the political nature of social identities and how these identities shape political engagement and power structures.

Identity politics is deeply embedded in the struggle for control over who receives what, when, and how. It serves as a means of opposing and challenging the fundamental cultural and symbolic relationships that exist between groups based on race, religion, ethnicity, and other social identifiers. Zahrotunnimah (2018) highlights that these dynamics have long been in existence, but identity politics provides a framework to vocalize and address these historically entrenched issues in a more organized and political manner.

The development of ethnic, religious, regional, and other group sentiments often serves as a precursor to political identity formation. As these sentiments become more expressive and strongly held, they evolve into a political force that influences decision-making processes and social interactions. Lestari (2018) further argues that identity politics can foster a strong sense of solidarity among people within a specific group or alliance, solidifying a collective sense of belonging that drives political action.

In this research, the phenomenological approach will be used to explore how identity politics manifests in contemporary Indonesian society, especially within the context of religious and ethnic identities. Phenomenology focuses on understanding lived experiences and the meanings that individuals attach to their social and political environments. This approach is particularly suited for examining how individuals and groups experience and navigate identity politics in their everyday lives.

The research will delve into the perceptions and experiences of Indonesian citizens as they engage with identity-based politics, particularly in relation to their religious and ethnic affiliations. By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals, this study aims to uncover the underlying motivations, beliefs, and attitudes that shape political identities in Indonesia. Through this lens, the research will examine how these identities influence not only political participation but also intergroup relations and social cohesion in a pluralistic society.

Identity politics refers to the tendency of members of a specific race, religion, gender, or ethnicity to conduct political actions based primarily on their own interests, with the sole aim of advancing these interests – often without regard to the interests of other collective groups. This phenomenon can manifest in various forms, whether related to ethnicity, religion, social class, economic status, culture, region, gender, or political beliefs. Political identity is often linked to the interests and aspirations of a particular group, leading to dynamics that prioritize those interests over broader, collective goals.

In the context of Indonesian society, the strengthening of identity politics, particularly in religious matters, has become a notable trend. This has the potential to cause various challenges in the practice of interreligious relations, which are an inherent and longstanding reality in Indonesian society. These interreligious relationships, while foundational to the nation's social fabric, are sometimes strained by political and ideological interests that prioritize specific group identities. The current dynamics of identity politics, if left

unchecked, may threaten the long-established practice of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among Indonesia's religious communities.

Islamic education plays a crucial role in shaping the way religious identity is understood and expressed, both individually and collectively. Within the framework of identity politics, Islamic education can serve as a powerful tool for fostering tolerance, understanding, and cooperation across religious divides. However, the way Islamic teachings are conveyed and interpreted – whether in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), madrasahs (Islamic schools), or public education – can either contribute to reinforcing political identities or serve as a bridge to greater interreligious harmony.

In Indonesia, where Islam is the dominant religion, Islamic education has the potential to shape how Muslims perceive and engage with people of other faiths. The focus of Islamic education on values such as justice, peace, and unity can be pivotal in counteracting the divisive tendencies of identity politics. However, if Islamic education is narrowly framed around sectarian or exclusionary beliefs, it could inadvertently exacerbate existing tensions and contribute to the further politicization of religious identity.

Therefore, Islamic education should be actively reformed to emphasize the values of inclusivity, respect for diversity, and national unity. By integrating principles from Islamic teachings that promote cooperation among different religious groups, Islamic education can become a force for good, helping to bridge divides and foster a more harmonious and cooperative society. This approach is essential for addressing the growing challenges posed by identity politics in Indonesia, ensuring that the practice of interreligious relations remains positive, creative, and constructive.

In this revision, I have refined the structure and incorporated the role of Islamic education as a potential solution to the challenges posed by identity politics, ensuring that it aligns with the broader context of interreligious relations in Indonesia. This helps to create a more holistic understanding of how identity politics and religious education intersect.

B. Methods

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach, focusing on a literature review to analyze the socio-political phenomena of identity politics and interreligious relations in Indonesia. This approach is particularly suitable for analyzing complex issues such as identity politics and interreligious relations, as it allows the researcher to delve deeply into the issues at hand and explore how these phenomena are interconnected. The research employs thematic analysis as the primary qualitative methodology. Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research that focuses on identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This methodology is ideal for this study, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of how political and religious identities influence the dynamics of social relations in Indonesia.

The analysis process involves several systematic steps. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with all the primary and secondary data sources, which included books, journal articles, e-books, and relevant media reports. The goal was to fully understand the context and content of the data before proceeding with deeper analysis. Next, the researcher created initial codes by identifying relevant segments of the data, categorizing them under key concepts such as "identity," "politics," "religion," and "interreligious relations." These codes were generated without predefined categories, allowing new themes to emerge during the analysis process. After the initial coding, the researcher searched for broader themes that represented major patterns in the data. These themes included the politicization of religious identity, the influence of political movements on interfaith relations, and the role of Islamic education in shaping or hindering interreligious harmony. The next step involved reviewing and refining these themes to ensure their relevance to the research questions and to verify that they accurately represented the data. This process also included checking for overlaps between themes and ensuring each theme was distinct and meaningful.

Once the themes were refined, the researcher defined and named them, providing detailed descriptions of each theme. The researcher then linked these themes to the theoretical framework of identity politics and interreligious relations, ensuring that each theme addressed a specific aspect of the issues being studied. Finally, the researcher synthesized the findings, drawing connections between the themes and presenting a cohesive narrative that explained the relationship between identity politics and interreligious relations in Indonesia, while also examining the role of Islamic education in shaping these dynamics.

Data sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and timeliness. Books, journal articles, and other academic sources were included if they directly addressed identity politics or interreligious relations, particularly in the Indonesian context. Sources were also selected based on their credibility, prioritizing peer-reviewed articles, books by recognized experts, and reputable media outlets. Preference was given to sources published within the last five years to ensure the data was relevant to current issues. To ensure the validity of the data and minimize potential bias, the researcher used triangulation, consulting multiple sources to cross-verify the findings. Each source was critically reviewed for its methodological quality to ensure the reliability of the data. Additionally, the researcher maintained a reflective stance throughout the process to identify and mitigate personal biases that could influence the interpretation of the data.

Through these detailed and systematic steps, this study aims to provide a clear and comprehensive analysis of identity politics and interreligious relations in Indonesia, with a specific focus on the role of Islamic education in shaping these social dynamics.

C. Results and discussion

Identity Politics and Islamic Education in Indonesia

Identity politics, when linked to political interests, can often lead to division, as it tends to prioritize the interests of specific groups over others. In the context of Indonesia, identity politics has often been used to rally support around issues such as race, religion, and ethnicity. However, for these differences to remain harmonious, there must be a unification process capable of bridging these divides, even though such divides are often born out of the dynamics of political and social division. Identity politics works by utilizing identification mechanisms as tools to attract support and organize the masses based on shared beliefs, nationality, or culture. This frequently results in ethnocentrism, where one group feels superior to another, and this tendency can escalate, leading to a snowball effect (Lestari, 2018).

Syafi'i Ma'arif notes that L.A. Kauffman was the first to define the essence of identity politics by tracing its roots to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a non-anarchist movement that supported civil rights in the U.S. during the 1960s (Amri et al., 2024). Political identity is commonly divided into categories such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, and religion, with political identity determining an individual's position within a hierarchy of power. These categories often define political engagement and influence the political spectrum of a society, including how identity politics is mobilized.

Identity politics gained significant attention from social and political scientists in the 1970s, particularly when America was grappling with gender discrimination, issues of race, feminism, and marginalized communities. Over time, the scope of identity politics has expanded to encompass issues related to religion, belief, and cultural ties. Kauffman's work, which traces the genealogy of student movements in the 1960s, remains a pivotal reference in understanding how identity politics evolved (Bernstein, 2005). However, the exact origins of the term "identity politics" remain unclear, and scholars continue to debate its specific initiators.

In Indonesia, political identity is often influenced by issues such as ethnicity, religion, ideology, and regional interests. These issues are typically articulated by elites, who frame them within broader political and social discourse. Identity politics in Indonesia frequently emerges in discussions about regional development and

autonomy, with religion playing a particularly sensitive role in political identity. The use of religious symbols in political rallies has become commonplace, reflecting the pervasive nature of religion as a political tool in the country (Tutukansa, 2022).

Religion, especially in Indonesia, has long been a powerful force in political identity. Mass movements, driven by religious sentiments, often react quickly to political events, using religious issues such as justice and perceived blasphemy as catalysts to rally public support. These movements are frequently leveraged by local elites to further their own political agendas, sometimes diverting attention from more pressing societal issues. Historically, identity politics in Indonesia has been tied to ethnicity, religion, and political ideology—elements that are intricately connected to the multicultural and unitary nature of the Indonesian state (Mubarok, 2023).

The relationship between politics and religion in Indonesia has a deep historical foundation, predating the nation's independence. Religious politics as a tool for mobilizing mass support has been a long-standing phenomenon in Indonesian society. Religious sentiment has historically been used as a powerful political tool to achieve specific group goals, often leading to division, despite the inherent diversity of the nation. Various social groups in Indonesia, rooted in socio-political-religious harmony, began to form in the early 20th century. However, political awareness among the general public was limited, and religion was often manipulated by elites for political purposes (Mubarok, 2023). Today, identity politics in Indonesia is closely tied to issues of local interests, religion, ethnicity, and ideology, frequently expressed by elites to consolidate power. Topics like regional autonomy, justice, and development dominate political discourse, often at the expense of national unity (Toloh & Muazidan Takalamingan, 2023).

Identity politics in Indonesia, according to Mahmud, involves the tendency of certain groups to fabricate narratives and engage in exclusive political activities. These activities aim to express the uniqueness of a group and gain power and influence, often at the expense of unity (Zahrotunnimah, 2018). The rise of identity politics, whether based on race, geography, culture, gender, or religion, is often driven by strong sectoral egos, leading to claims of superiority and exclusion of other groups. This sense of injustice or longing for equality can, at times, overlook the rights and identities of other groups.

Islamic education in Indonesia plays a significant role in shaping political identities, particularly in relation to religion. While Islamic educational values promote peace, unity, and mutual respect, they are sometimes co-opted into the political realm. The role of Islamic education—through institutions such as

pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) and madrasahs (Islamic schools) – is critical in determining how young Indonesians perceive and engage with issues of religious and political identity.

Islamic education has the potential to either bridge or deepen the divisions created by identity politics. When taught with an emphasis on inclusivity and national unity, Islamic education can promote interreligious dialogue and foster a spirit of tolerance. On the other hand, if Islamic education is framed in a way that emphasizes religious exclusivity, it can contribute to the polarization of society and the intensification of identity politics.

Studies have shown that Islamic education values, when properly integrated into the national educational framework, can be a tool for promoting peaceful coexistence in a multicultural society. Islamic teachings that emphasize justice, mercy, and social responsibility can serve as a foundation for addressing issues of identity politics and interreligious relations in Indonesia. Therefore, the role of Islamic education in shaping political and religious identities is a critical aspect of this research, as it provides insight into how education can either mitigate or exacerbate the effects of identity politics in Indonesia.

This study will examine how Islamic education, as a powerful tool in shaping political and religious identities, influences the dynamics of identity politics in Indonesia. It will explore whether Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia encourage divisive ideologies or promote unity, particularly in the context of religious plurality and the multicultural nature of the Indonesian state.

Identity Politics and Interreligious Relations in Indonesia: Relevance to Education

Identity politics, when utilized as a tool for mobilizing individuals based on shared beliefs, nationality, or culture, can lead to strong group ethnocentrism, often characterized by the belief that one's own group is superior to others. This tendency is particularly evident in Indonesia, where the majority religious group has sometimes used identity politics to marginalize minority groups. This is evident in various socio-political events, such as the 2017 Jakarta Regional Election and the 2019 Presidential Election, which saw issues of race and religion take center stage, intensifying social polarization and creating psychological pressures among voters (Syahputra & Ruslan, 2021).

The use of ethnic and religious identity politics in Indonesia has been highlighted in the political discourse surrounding elections, where candidates' ethnic and religious backgrounds become key talking points that stir public

emotions. For example, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election witnessed fierce competition between candidates based on their ethnic and religious identities, with candidates like Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) and Anies Baswedan representing opposing ethnic and religious groups. This kind of identity-driven political discourse, though powerful in rallying support, also contributes to societal division, both on a national and regional scale (Ruslan & Harahap, 2020).

Identity politics, particularly along ethnic, religious, and regional lines, remains prevalent in Indonesia, even influencing contemporary elections. Political organizations often use race, ethnicity, and religion as tools to build support, sometimes exacerbating social divisions. For instance, during the 2019 Presidential Election, the use of provocative and inflammatory rhetoric based on religious and ethnic identities led to the spread of hate speech and deepened societal divisions. Such political dynamics, when coupled with the uncritical consumption of information, especially via social media, can undermine the democratic process and threaten national unity (Simanullang, 2024).

This phenomenon raises significant concerns about the state of interreligious relations in Indonesia, as religious and ethnic identities are often manipulated for political gain. The continued use of divisive language, such as "anti-foreigners" or "anti-ethnic," further illustrates the danger of identity politics in fostering division (Amri et al., 2024). Furthermore, regional movements calling for autonomy, such as those seen in Papua and Aceh, reflect the growing trend of regional identity politics, which further complicates national unity (Rozi, Noor, Gayatri, 2021).

However, while identity politics poses significant challenges to national integrity, it is important to consider how Islamic education can play a role in either exacerbating or mitigating these challenges. Islamic education, whether through pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) or madrasahs (Islamic schools), has historically been a significant force in shaping the political and religious identities of Indonesian Muslims. This educational framework has the potential to either reinforce divisive ideologies or promote unity and mutual respect across religious lines.

Islamic education values that emphasize justice, mercy, and social responsibility can help counteract the harmful effects of identity politics. If Islamic education fosters a spirit of inclusivity and tolerance, it can contribute to a more harmonious society where religious diversity is celebrated rather than exploited for political gain. On the other hand, if Islamic education is framed around exclusionary religious ideologies, it could contribute to the perpetuation of intergroup tensions and deepen the divides between religious communities.

From an educational standpoint, the relationship between identity politics and interreligious relations is highly relevant to both theory and practice. In educational theory, it is essential to understand how education shapes the formation of political and religious identities, as well as how these identities influence social dynamics. The study of identity politics within educational contexts can help educators design curricula that promote critical thinking, tolerance, and inclusivity.

Islamic education, when integrated with democratic values, can provide students with the tools to engage with their own religious identities while respecting the identities of others. This approach aligns with values-based education, which emphasizes the importance of fostering not just academic skills but also social cohesion, ethical values, and national integration.

In educational practice, it is crucial to examine how Islamic educational institutions contribute to shaping the attitudes and behaviors of students towards religion and identity. Pesantren and madrasah can be seen as potential sites for promoting peace and interfaith dialogue. Educators must ensure that the content and delivery of religious education are aligned with national values of pluralism and inclusivity, which can help mitigate the divisive nature of identity politics. The growing influence of identity politics in the political sphere underscores the need for a transformative approach to education, one that empowers students to critically evaluate the role of religion in politics and understand the consequences of identity-driven political movements. The goal is to foster a generation of learners who are not only knowledgeable about their own religious traditions but also equipped to engage with others in a respectful and constructive manner.

By integrating Islamic education into the broader framework of social and political education, schools can become active agents of change, helping to reduce the impact of identity politics and promoting national unity. This approach can be particularly effective in Indonesia, where education plays a central role in shaping societal norms and values.

D. Conclusion

Identity politics has become a significant phenomenon in shaping the contemporary socio-political landscape of Indonesia, with great potential to cause social polarization and threaten national cohesion. This phenomenon is rooted in the exploitation of issues of ethnicity, religion, and local interests in the political process, which is evident in various national and regional political moments. However, Islamic education has a strategic role as a balancing force capable of mitigating the disintegrative effects of identity politics. Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren and madrasah, if directed towards values of inclusivity, tolerance, and social justice, have the potential to become transformative agents in shaping an inclusive religious and national identity. Through the integration of pluralism

and democracy into the curriculum, Islamic education not only strengthens religious understanding but also fosters social awareness and critical thinking among students regarding divisive political narratives. Thus, Islamic education can become a strategic tool for strengthening Indonesia's multicultural identity and encouraging the active participation of the younger generation in building a more just, inclusive, and united society. The role of education that promotes dialogue, recognition of diversity, and commitment to universal human values is an important foundation in responding to the challenges of identity politics in Indonesia.

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