

Challenges of Religious Harmony in Indonesia: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract — The study of challenges to religious harmony has always been an ongoing discussion. Although history has provided valuable lessons regarding various interfaith tensions. it does not mean that the issue is resolved. Events that disrupt religious harmony occur cyclically in various forms and backgrounds. In the context of national life, stakeholders have made many efforts to address these conflicts, but they have not guaranteed the creation of harmony in religious life. There is still a need to increase awareness of living in the spirit of unity in diversity. Security approaches may temporarily stop conflicts but do not guarantee a permanent solution. Dialogues, which are considered more dignified and inclusive, have also not yielded satisfactory results. Dialogues and harmony often occur only among leaders, while conflicts frequently arise at the grassroots level. Sociologically, religion, with its essence of believe in God, is expressed by its adherents through thoughts, behaviors, and communal living. This often leads to exclusive attitudes both in individual and collective behaviors. In other words, there are religious cultures that sometimes negate others, making it difficult to form the inclusive culture needed in Indonesia. By examining this problem historically, it is intended to learn valuable lessons in increasing collective awareness of the importance of perspectives and actions to avoid conflicts among fellow citizens.

Keywords -- religious harmony, inclusive culture, communal living, collective awareness

I. INTRODUCTION

Tensions in Establishing the Foundation of the State

Prior to Indonesia's independence from colonization, there was a need to develop a concept regarding the foundation of the state. This was carried out by the Preparatory Committee for Indonesian Independence (PPKI), consisting of figures representing various components of the nation [1]. There were components considered to represent the nationalist group and those considered to represent religious groups. The presence of religious elements in the discussions on the foundation of the state reflects the sociological condition of the nation, which has been religious since the beginning. Religion has been an important component in the nation's life, and there is no separation between the

In the debates on the foundation of the state, the prominent and attention-grabbing issue was religion, specifically the proposition that the Indonesian state should be based on Islamic law (sharia) due to historical and sociological reasons. Historically, Indonesian

independence was the result of the struggle of a majority-Muslims fighting for independence based on religious grounds (Islam). Many Islamic scholars were involved in the struggle for independence, such as Kiai Mojo, Kiai Hasyim Ay'ari, Kiai Ahmad Dahlan, Kiai Rifa'i Kalisalak, and others. Moreover, demographically, the majority of the population has been Muslim since the arrival of Islam in the 13th century. Based on these factors, it was reasonable to propose that the state should be based on Islamic law. Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, a prominent figure in Muhammadiyah organization, insisted on proposing that the foundation of the state should be Islamic law. This is reflected in the proposal regarding the formulation of the Preamble to the Constitution with the phrase "based on the belief in the One and Only God with the obligation to uphold Islamic law for its adherents."

Although this formulation was eventually crossed out through a lengthy debate process, it is worth noting that religion has been an important factor in the nation's life and cannot be separated from the state even until today. Moreover, the removal of those seven words was preceded "By the 'threat' of not participating in the declaration of independence for people living in the eastern regions with a majority non-Muslim population.

Ki Bagus Hadikusumo is one of the prominent leaders of the Muhammadiyah organization, and his thoughts will certainly inspire Muhammadiyah members in their attitudes and actions in national and state life.

After the failure of Islamic groups in fighting for a state based on Islamic law, armed resistance emerged in several regions with the aim of establishing an Islamic state. In West Java, Kartosuwirjo proclaimed the Indonesian Islamic State on August 7, 1949. Kahar Muzakar led a rebellion in South Sulawesi in 1952, and Daud Beure'eh proclaimed an Islamic State in Aceh.

During the New Order government (during President Soeharto's era), when the Pansasila as single foundation (asas tunggal) was introduced in national life, there was a fierce debate within the Muhammadiyah community. Even if they eventually accepted the "Asas Tunggal Pancasila", there were small notes that reflected Muhammadiyah's Islamic stance in national life. The acceptance of this principle by Muhammadiyah happened during a critical time before the Muktamar (assembly) in Solo. Mr. AR Fachruddin stated his willingness to accept

the principle by using an analogy of motorcyclists wearing helmets on mandatory helmet routes [3].

II. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In national life, the idea of the Pancasila as the sole foundation by the New Order government was intended to strengthen the unity of the nation based on a common platform, namely the values of Pancasila. The government saw that the relationships between religious adherents and ethnic backgrounds, as well as traditions, had the potential to disrupt the unity of the nation. By implementing such principle, friction, tension, and even conflicts between religious adherents, which often occurred in Indonesia, could be minimized.

Unlike Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama organization eventually accepted Pancasila as the sole foundation through the Munas Alim Ulama forum in 1983 in Situbondo. The acceptance was based on the argument that practicing Pancasila is the embodiment of Indonesian Muslims' efforts to implement Islamic teaching. The belief in the One Supreme God as the basis of the Republic of Indonesia, as stated in Article 29, paragraph (1) of the 1945 Constitution, which underlies the other principles, reflects the concept of monotheism (Tauhid) according to the Islamic faith.

With the stance of these two major organizations (Muhammadiyah and NU), the issue of the state's foundation further strengthened Pancasila's position as the basis for the nation and state. However, it does not mean that there is no longer a desire to change the state's foundation with Islamic law. This issue always resurfaces, voiced by groups affiliated with views that still want the implementation of Islamic law in Indonesia, such as the actions carried out by groups like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Jamaah Ansoruttauhid (JAT), and others. It is not impossible for such movements to continue emerging in the future, in line with the climate of freedom since the beginning of the reformation era in 1998" [2].

Initiative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs

The diversity of social backgrounds in Indonesia, with 1,340 ethnic groups, 718 regional languages, and 5 religions, is considered a cultural wealth and tradition of the Indonesian nation. These various ethnic groups and languages are spread across the archipelago from Sabang (Aceh) to Papua. On the other hand, this diversity also poses a threat of nation unity. Religion as primordial bonds can become triggering factors for conflicts among citizens.

Neighboring countries provide concrete examples where religion has hindered national unity, as seen in the Philippines and Thailand. The Philippine government, particularly in the Mindanao region, has been involved in armed conflicts for 54 years. Similarly, the Thai government has faced similar challenges in the Pattani region in the southern part of the country. Based on the occurrence of religious conflicts and the negative potential arising from poor interfaith relations, the Ministry took the initiative to address interfaith relations through various activities [4].

In response to the increasing tensions and suspicions surrounding the issue of Christianization, on November 30, 1967, the Minister of Religion, K.H. Muhammad Dachlan, organized an interfaith consultation in Jakarta. As a basis for the consultation, the government developed a concept called the Charter, which included the following points:

- 1. Assisting the government in suggesting efforts to resolve issues arising in the lives of religious communities.
- 2. Striving for mutual understanding and respect among all religious communities.
- 3. Supporting one another morally, spiritually, and materially, and striving to convince atheists to believe in the One Almighty God without making those who have embraced a religion target of proselytization.

This initiative was continued with the Program for Fostering Religious Harmony, led by Minister Prof. Mukti Ali from 1971 to 1978. Mukti Ali promoted the spirit of dialogue with the formulation "Agree in disagreement" as a keyword to encourage acknowledging differences while fostering a spirit of togetherness and mutual assistance among fellow citizens.

During the consolidation period of the New Order regime (1967-1970), there was a perception that the government obstructed Islamic political aspirations, while non-Muslims began to gain positions of power. At the same time, missionary movements achieved great success in Indonesia. This situation not only gave rise to mutual suspicion and ideological conflicts between religious groups but also resulted in open conflicts. In several cities in Central Java and Aceh, Muslim youths burned churches, while in North Sulawesi and Ambon, mosques were burned by Protestant Christian adherents.

With the same spirit, in 1978, Minister of Religion Alamsyah Ratu Perwiranegara introduced the concept of the Three Pillars of Religious Harmony (harmony among religious communities, internal harmony within religious communities, and harmony between religious communities and the government). Tensions based on religious factors not only occur among religious communities but also within the internal dynamics of religious communities themselves. This arises due to escalating differences in understanding between mainstream groups and new emerging ideologies. An example of this is the conflict between Sunni Muslims on one side and Ahmadiyya and Shia groups on the other.

The Ahmadiyya conflict has attracts attention both domestically and internationally, especially during incidents such in Cikeusik (small village in Pandeglang region, Banten province) and Sampang incidents (Shia), which resulted in casualties. Similarly, tensions arise between religious communities and the government due to resistance against government policies that affect religious life. An example of this is the mandatory application of the Panasila as single principle in societal organizations, which is regarded as marginalizing religious values in daily life.

In recent years, the Ministry of Religious Affairs initiated the Program for Religious Moderation under the

leadership of Minister Lukman Hakim Saifuddin. During Lukman's leadership, there were several tragic events related to interfaith relations, including church bombings that occurred in three places simultaneously on May 13, 2018. The first bomb attack took place at the Santa Maria Tak Bercela Church on Jalan Ngagel Madya, Gubeng District at 06:30. The second bomb attack occurred at the Indonesian Christian Church on Jalan Raya Diponegoro at 07:15, and the third bomb attack occurred at the Pentecostal Church on Jalan Arjuno at 07:53. Eight people were reported dead, and 38 others were injured.

Moderation, derived from the English word "moderate," means keeping within reasonable or proper limits; not extreme, excessive, or intense. In other words, it means maintaining attitudes and behaviors within reasonable and sensible boundaries, without being extreme or excessive. In everyday communication, people of different religions will encounter others with different beliefs about truth. Most religious communities make claims of truth about their own religion. Although there have been views on the unity of religions, such as the views of Sufi scholars Al-Hallaj, Ibn Arabi, and modern figures, these views are only followed by a limited number of people. The implications of these claims of truth can breed seeds of enmity, as has often happened. This extreme viewpoint can, to some extent, lead to inhumane and undemocratic actions. A moderate stance allows room to believe in the truth of one's own religion while respecting others with different beliefs.

Tensions between religious communities continue to occur in areas where Muslims are in the minority, such as the Tolikara case in 2015. Riots broke out in Karubaga, Tolikara Regency, Papua during the celebration of Eid al-Fitr on July 17, 2015. The incident began when a group of people suspected to be from the Indonesian Evangelical Church (GIDI) arrived at the Baitul Mustaqin Prayer Hall in Tolikara, Papua, while Muslims were performing the Eid prayer on Friday morning, July 17, 2015. They protested because the loudspeakers used by the Muslim congregation disturbed the event being held by GIDI. As a result of the riots, one child was shot dead on the spot, one prayer hall, several houses, and shops were burned by the mob.

The three church bombings in Surabaya and the burning of Muslim places of worship have undermined the long-standing efforts to improve interreligious relations in Indonesia. It seems that the intensive dialogues built have lost their meaning. Or perhaps harmony only exists at the level of religious leaders, while at the grassroots level, suspicion and animosity still prevail.

Interreligious conflicts with sporadic nuances have often occurred during the Soeharto era, which is often considered a repressive period in dealing with movements. Thoughts and movements perceived as threatening the regime's sustainability were labeled as subversive as a stern warning to the perpetrators and an attempt to create a deterrent effect. However, conflicts with religious nuances still occur, including those caused by issues of Christianization among the Muslim community. Discussions among religious leaders regarding religious propagation have not found common

ground. This is related to the restrictions on religious propagation for those who have already embraced a religion. The focus is on the Christianization activities among muslims especially those coming from the poor. This situation correlates with a significant increase in the Christian population from 2% to 6%. Incidents like church destruction occurred, such as in 1968 in Jatibarang (West Java) and in the early 1969 in a Protestant church in Slipi, Jakarta. Similar incidents also occurred in Purwodadi (Central Java)

To address tensions and friction arising from the issue of Christianization, in addition to engaging in ineffective dialogue, the government also issued regulations in the form of a Joint Decree by the Minister of Religion and the Minister of Internal Affairs, numbered 01/BER/MDN-MAG/1969. Its content pertains to the implementation of government officials' duties in ensuring order and smooth implementation of the development and religious worship of their adherents. This regulation was issued to determine that before a place of worship can be built, approval must be obtained from the local residents living near the construction site, and a permit must be obtained from the regional office of the Ministry of Religion.

Some Christian followers claim that this regulation is used to discriminate against them and prevent them from building churches. Meanwhile, Muslims argue that Christians, in some cases, intentionally establish churches in areas with a small Christian population with the aim of creating a base in Muslim areas to attract them to convert to Christianity. Mutual suspicion still happened among Muslims and Christian at that time.

Another prominent religious conflict during the New Order era was the Situbondo riots that occurred on October 10, 1996. The riots began after the unsatisfactory verdict against a young man named Soleh (charged with blasphemy). The courthouse was set on fire, and churches and a primary school were damaged, along with other public facilities (21 churches were vandalized, 1 courthouse, several schools, and 5 casualties, including the family of Pastor Ischak).

The handling by the police only started at 4:30 p.m., with 120 people arrested, including 11 high school students. The cause of the riots was a misunderstanding of the handling of the blasphemy case. Prior to this, there was a case of blasphemy committed by a young man named Soleh against a charismatic figure in this area, which sparked the anger of the masses. After the sanctions were imposed on Soleh, rumors spread that the young man was protected by the church. This led to the riots targeting the destruction of churches and even resulting in casualties.

Although the issue of the establishment of places of worship has been regulated by the government, problems still occur in practice. The establishment of a mosque in Manokwari was reported to have faced rejection from the local community in 2015, but it was eventually inaugurated in 2022. Tensions surrounding the establishment of places of worship also occurred among Christian followers when they attempted to build the Yasmin Church in Bogor. In 2006, the Bogor City Government issued a building permit (IMB) with the

number 645.8-372/2006 for the construction of a place of worship in the name of the Indonesian Christian Church (GKI) in Pengadilan (Yasmin). The city administration allowed GKI Yasmin to be built at Jalan KH Abdullah Bin Nuh Number 31, Curug Mekar Village, West Bogor Sub-district, Bogor City. However, five years later, on March 11, 2011, the Bogor City Government revoked the permit through the Decree of the Mayor of Bogor Number 645.45-137 of 2011. The revocation of the permit was justified by the rejection from the surrounding residents. Some residents accused the falsification of one of the requirements for establishing GKI Yasmin.

After fifteen years of ongoing dynamics, the church was finally able to be established at a different location and was officially inaugurated on April 9, 2023.

Interreligious tensions at the grassroots level, such as the establishment of places of worship, are often accompanied by conflicting news reports. The conflicting information regarding these issues further complicates the search for solutions to foster harmony at the grassroots level. People are easily provoked by such news because religion binds its followers through emotional and sacred connections.

The Maluku Conflict is considered one of the deadliest civil wars in the world. Compared to Bosnia, which took five years and claimed 10,000 lives, the Maluku Conflict lasted only two years but resulted in nearly 8,000 deaths and displaced over 350,000 people. According to records from several NGOs concerned with Maluku, approximately 6,000 jihad fighters were sent to Ambon.

Similarly, the Poso Conflict can also be characterized as a religious conflict, considering the significant role played by religious communities involved in it. This conflict, which claimed many lives, began with a simple incident: a fight between two youths of different religions on December 24, 1998, due to the influence of alcohol. The conflict escalated into the destruction of settlements, invoking solidarity in the name of religion.

Internal conflicts within Islamic communities in Indonesia also occur as described by the following two cases. This reflect internal conflicts within the Muslim community due to differences in interpreting religious teachings.

Ahmadiyya Case

Ideologically, Indonesian Muslims adhere to the Sunni school of thought, which traces its origins to the theological thoughts of Abu Hasan al-Asy'ari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi in the 10th century. The Sunni ideology tends to be more moderate in several issues compared to the prevalent thoughts of that era, such as Mu'tazilah. In Indonesia, Sunni teachings have been propagated through Islamic boarding schools that have studied and disseminated mainstream Sunni teachings since the arrival of Islam brought by Gujarati merchants in the 13th century [5].

As a result of the process of Islamization and massive education, the majority of Muslims in Indonesia can be considered Sunni. Every efforts would be made to maintain this ideology and has been protected by its

followers from distortions caused by the spread of other ideologies. One example of such conflict is the tension between the Sunni community on one side and the Ahmadiyya on the other.

Ahmadiyya entered Indonesia in 1925 in Tapak Tuan, West Aceh, and was registered as a legal entity by the Ministry of Justice with the decree No. JA.5/23/13 on March 13, 1953. Their religious beliefs are considered deviant, particularly regarding the recognition of a prophet after Muhammad. Therefore, several countries have banned the spread of this religious belief, including:

- 1. Malaysia since June 18, 1975, based on the Decision of the Conference of Rulers on June 18, 1975.
- Brunei Darussalam, which prohibits the teachings of Ahmadiyya throughout the country.
- 3. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since May 6, 1981, based on a letter from the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Jakarta in 1981, No. 8/1/10/B-374/1401, dated May 6, 1981

Similar rejection reactions have also emerged in Indonesia, including:

- The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) declared in the second MUI congress in 1980 that Ahmadiyya Qadianis are a separate group outside of Islam, deviant, and misleading (Resolution No. 05/Kep/MUNAS/II/MUI/1980)
- 2. Muhammadiyah, through the decision of its Majelis Tarjih, established that there is no prophet after Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). If a person does not believe in and accept the verses and hadiths regarding this matter, they are considered to be denying it. And whoever denies it is considered a disbeliever (PP Muhammadiyah, Central Compilation of Tarjih).
- 3. The Syuriah Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) issued a decision stating that the Ahmadiyya sect in Indonesia deviates from Islamic teachings. The Ahmadiyya sect, which distorts the Quran, should be banned.

In addition to the above fatwas, several regions have also issued local regulations prohibiting Ahmadiyya, which are seen as potentially causing chaos. This has been one of the triggers for the recurring violence in several regions that seems to never end. There have been multiple instances of destruction of Ahmadiyya community facilities in various areas such as Tasikmalaya, Kuningan, Depok, and others. In the NTB region, the Ahmadiyya community has suffered prolonged suffering as they have been forcibly displaced from their hometowns at uncertain times. Another prominent example is the Ahmadiyya Cikeusik Conflict. Ahmadiyya in Cikeusik was introduced by Ismail in 1980, and before the clash, the number of Ahmadiyya followers was 29. It started with the unrest in the community regarding one Ahmadiyya follower (Imam Jayadi), who also served as the second Imam of Nurul Dhulami Mosque.

Two weeks before the riots occurred, there were SMS messages circulating about a plan to attack Ahmadiyya. For that reason, KH Amir (a prominent figure), the local village head, the local police sector, and

the Pandeglang Police Resort persuaded Suparman (an Ahmadiyya member) and others to leave the village. However, Deden and others (three people) refused to leave the village, and this was seen as a defiant attitude. Around 1,500 people stormed the house of Ahmadiyya leaders in that area on Sunday February, 6 th, 2011 and in the incident, six people were declared dead.

Although the current conditions may seem safe without incidents, concerns still persist based on past experiences that religiously motivated riots never seem to end

Shia Case

Unlike Ahmadiyya, there is no fatwa from the Central Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) regarding the deviation of Shia sects, so tension has not occurred on a massive scale. In fact, in several areas, there is harmony in daily life, such as in Jepara (Bangsri) where Shia residents mix and cooperate with the community in joint events.

However, notable incidents still occur, such as the clash between Sunni residents and Shia groups in Karang Gayam village, Sampang. This conflict was triggered by a series of reasons that culminated in the rejection of the presence and development of Shia in that area. The incident took place on August 26, 2012, around 10:00 AM, resulting in several Shia houses being burned down and one Shia resident losing their life. After the riots, Shia residents were temporarily accommodated in the GOR Sampang, but later they were relocated to the Puspa Agro Sukodono Sidoarjo complex for an indefinite period as there was no resolution between the two conflicting groups. The Sunni-Shia conflict in Sampang has been ongoing since the Shia sect entered Madura (Sampang) [6].

On August 26, 2012, physical conflicts, house burnings, and the expulsion of Shia residents from Sampang occurred. The clash between the community and the followers of Tajul Muluk (Shia) happened around 10:00 AM. The casualties from the clash included one fatality named Hamamah, one critically injured individual named Thohir, and five others wounded by fragments of Molotov bombs, mines, and explosives.

Each party involved is adamant in their respective positions, making it difficult to resolve the conflict. According to reports from related parties, the Shia group insists that Shia teachings are the true teachings, while everything else is considered deviant. They desire to return to their hometown as a place to live, work, and seek safety and peace. In response to the advice from Sunni leaders for them to send their children to non-Shia boarding schools, they insist that they will not send their children to the schools offered by the government. On the other hand, the Sunni group remains steadfast in their position, stating that they will accept the Shia followers back with the condition that they return to the majority's beliefs in the Nangkernang Karang Gayam Omben Sampang community.

Although there seems to be no conflict at present, all parties must remain vigilant and learn from the history of the past, where such cases occurred cyclically in different

formats. The stories of Ahmadiyya and Shia in Indonesia seem never-ending, even though the nation has entered the reform era with an open, democratic spirit and respect for human rights.

In addition to promoting the idea of Religious Moderation through education to emphasize the importance of maintaining unity in diversity, institutional efforts are being made to optimize the role of the Religious Harmony Forum as a platform for discussing solutions to religious issues in Indonesia.

Challenges in the Digital Era

The digital era, marked by easy access to information, has its own consequences for religious life in a diverse country like Indonesia. Incidents that occur in one region quickly spread to other areas with various narratives, often accompanied by deliberate actions from irresponsible parties to disrupt interreligious relations. An example of this is the news of the burning of a major mosque in East Indonesia, which initially triggered emotions among some Muslims before it was explained that the news, accompanied by a video illustration, was from several years ago when a mosque incident occurred in a different location.

Another example is the spread of false news, speeches, videos, and photos through the WhatsApp messaging app, commonly referred to as hoaxes. Such messages appear to be created with the intention of creating turmoil among the community, especially among religious believers. They choose religion as a triggering factor because of the nature of religion that binds its followers with sacred bonds that are always upheld, even if necessary through violence

Sociologically, religion, which is essentially human belief in the Absolute Reality referred to as God, tends to manifest itself in tangible forms through thoughts and actions. A Muslim or Christian will inevitably have perspectives and thoughts that are influenced by their respective religions, as well as their individual and group behaviors. In Islam, there is the concept of the ummah, which binds individuals together in the spirit of unity with a strong bond of solidarity. Prophet Muhammad once stated, "Muslims are like a building, with each component reinforcing one another." The expression "unus Christianus nullus Christianus" (one Christian is not a Christian) highlights the importance of community or ecclesia. Other religions also emphasize solidarity among their followers. The emergence of several conflicts between religious communities is generally caused by solidarity among followers of certain religions due to minor incidents such as the conflicts in Maluku, Poso, Situbondo, and others.

III. CONCLUSION

Promoting ideas of harmony, inclusiveness, and an inclusive attitude must be done with caution, considering the strong primordial attachment of religious communities to their respective religions, especially in Indonesia. Article 29, paragraphs 1 and 2, guarantee the freedom of citizens to practice their own religion and worship according to their beliefs. Granting freedom to

worship means recognizing the freedom of each religion. Exclusive thinking goes against this spirit, while inclusive thinking, in the sense of pluralism, also contradicts the granting of freedom to each religious community.

Although there may currently be no conflict visible, all parties must remain vigilant and learn from the history of past incidents where cases like this occurred cyclically in different formats. The stories of Ahmadiyya and Shia in Indonesia seem never-ending, even though the nation has entered the reform era with an open, democratic spirit and respect for human rights.

In addition to promoting the idea of Religious Moderation through education to emphasize the importance of maintaining unity in diversity, institutional efforts are being made to optimize the role of the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) as a platform for discussing solutions to religious issues in Indonesia.

History is the best teacher that provides valuable lessons about the joys or sorrows of humanity, which should make all of us wiser in deciding what needs to be done for the future.

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