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## Indonesia's identity politics and populism: Disruption to national cohesion

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## Indonesia's identity politics and populism: Disruption to national cohesion

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### Abstract

The principle of unity in diversity in Indonesia is increasingly challenged by the rise of identity politics and populism. These dynamics emerge as a confluence of pragmatic political strategies and the mobilisation of sectarian groups, often leveraging religious and ethnic sentiments during election campaigns. While effective in garnering popular support, such tactics undermine national unity and social cohesion, serving as a shortcut to power at the cost of societal harmony. This issue is particularly pronounced in district head elections, where the politicisation of tribal, religious, racial, and inter-community identities has become pervasive. These elections, intended to reflect democratic principles, are frequently overshadowed by divisive identity-based politics. This paper examines how identity politics and populism significantly threaten social cohesion, especially during general elections. Employing a normative research methodology, it analyses legal norms and ethical theories to argue against the use of identity politics and populism at any level of political campaigns. The findings reveal that practical politics in Indonesia often relies on these divisive strategies for electoral success, exacerbating pre-existing societal tensions. The paper posits that identity politics can be overcome with reinterpreting it and referring to Pancasila as a principle to attain better policy.

**Keywords:** Election, Unity, Pancasila, Exploitation.

### Introduction

After the reformation, the Indonesian nation faced increasing challenges from identity politics, which prioritised certain groups or symbols to gain political power. If left unchecked, this could threaten national resilience and the quality of democracy in Indonesia. The concept of citizenship faced challenges not only from the exclusionary aspects of ethnic and regional sentiments but also from the lack of success by civil society groups in establishing robust political alternatives during the reformation period, despite opportunities to do so. It is



noteworthy that in Indonesia, there has been more focus on empowering civil society than strengthening citizenship. This phenomenon requires solutions to ensure the existing democratic process operates within Indonesia's legal framework.

In practical politics, identity is often used in ways that deviate from the values of unity and cohesion, serving as a political tool to garner votes in elections, gain mass support, or achieve political objectives such as secession from the Republic of Indonesia. At its core, identity politics is a phenomenon that accentuates differences in identity. The major challenge currently faced by Indonesia is identity politics, which tends towards national disintegration. Ideally, democracy presents itself with an inclusive, equal, and civil rights-focused face, but the practices of identity politics are undermining it. This situation is also evident in Indonesia, where democracy has become a gateway for the massive rise of identity politics through conflict, violence, and discrimination against other groups (Wingarta et al., 2021). Populism, on the other hand, is a political approach that pits "the people" against "the elite" and portrays the establishment as corrupt or indifferent to the concerns of ordinary citizens. Populist leaders often capitalise on popular discontent, economic grievances, and cultural anxieties to mobilise support. Populist rhetoric tends to simplify complex issues, advocate for direct action over institutional processes, and position the leader as the sole voice of the people.

Identity politics strengthens due to growing resentment resulting from neglecting the need for recognition and the role of key actors who mobilise and politicise identity, known as entrepreneurs of identity. Identity politics is threatening because it tends to restrict rather than liberate. Elites can manipulate the ambiguity in claims of representation and legitimacy to achieve their interests. In Indonesia, when the authoritarian New Order regime collapsed, the state ideology of Pancasila lost its near-hegemonic authority and faced challenges from a surge of religious, ethnic, and regional identity politics. The processes of democratisation and decentralisation during reformation intensified and accelerated these fragmented identities, which were used to mobilise new constituencies. This fragmentation seemingly compromised a shared sense of Indonesian citizenship. In the following sections, I will demonstrate that the concept of citizenship was not only marginalised by the rise of ethnic and religious identity politics but also undermined by the inability of civil society groups to establish political alternatives (Nordholt, 2018).

The issue of identity politics often emerges in district head elections (Romli, 2019), where tribal, religious, racial, and inter-community (TRRI/SARA) sentiments are frequently politicised. A prominent example was the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which drew significant attention due to demonstrations demanding the prosecution of Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama for alleged blasphemy (Habibi, 2022). The largest protest, known as the Islam Defending Front 212, took place on December 2, 2016, reflecting the intense use of identity politics in the campaign. This case, dominated by SARA issues, overshadowed critical governance concerns such as urban planning and social problem management, highlighting the disruptive role of identity politics in Indonesia's democratic processes.

Inglehart and Norris (2016) noted that this kind of populism emerges under two main conditions: economic inequality and cultural value conflicts. Economically, populists are seen as representatives of older factions resisting the dominance of new elites and advocating for modern capitalism, which marginalises those who previously benefitted from rent accumulation. Cultural clashes fuel populism as new identities challenge existing majority-held values, prompting reactionary responses to reclaim community values (Syamsurrijal et al., 2022). In this populist context, the discourse around identity undergoes a shift. Identity politics no longer solely serves minority groups' struggle for recognition but also encompasses majority groups resisting global pressures urging cultural change at home. Populism articulates the majority's sense of marginalisation due to economic competition and global cultural shifts. Its rise has sparked scholarly debate over its democratic implications, with critics viewing it as a

pathological outcome of liberal democracy's struggle to adapt to globalisation's cultural changes while entrenched power dynamics persist.

Marginalisation results from neoliberal economic practices and the depoliticisation of liberal democracy, which limits political participation primarily to formal processes. Political elites exploit this situation by using populist rhetoric to mobilise support within democratic frameworks (Supratikno, 2022). Therefore, identity and culture are not inherent but constructed through power struggles to assert existence within political arenas. The main thesis of this paper is that practical politics in Indonesia tends to use identity politics and populism to achieve its electoral goal by sacrificing social cohesion. We argue that identity politics is linked to underlying societal conflicts, particularly the division into three prominent social groups: religious, nationalist, and ethnic. Each of these groups emphasises the exclusivity of the dominant religious and nationalist factions (Castells, 2003), perpetually vying for influence in the public sphere. Additionally, political dynamics often exploit these issues as tools to secure and uphold political power, fueling diverse societal conflicts. Our study proposes that by interpreting Pancasila as a means to understand and harmonise social cohesion, we may overcome the negative influence of identity politics.

## Method

This study employs a juridical-normative approach to examine the intersection of identity politics, populism and their impact on national cohesion in Indonesia. The research focuses on analysing legal norms, ethical principles, and constitutional provisions that regulate political practices and safeguard social unity. Primary data sources include Indonesian legal frameworks, election laws, and relevant constitutional articles. Secondary data consists of scholarly works, case studies, and reports on identity politics and populism in Indonesia. The method involves critically evaluating the misuse of legal provisions and the ethical implications of employing identity-based narratives in political campaigns. By applying normative legal theories, the study explores how identity politics and populism conflict with democratic values and undermine social cohesion. The findings aim to provide insights into the role of legal and ethical frameworks in addressing the challenges posed by these practices in Indonesia's political landscape.

## Results and Discussion

Pancasila, as the state ideology, sufficiently accommodates the interests of all religious communities in Indonesia (Muchtar, 2017). The spirit of divinity, which forms the highest and fundamental basis in the first principle, extends to the national goal of social justice for all Indonesians, as expressed in the final principle. It also encompasses moral and ethical issues, such as what is good and evil, permissible and forbidden, what actions we should take, how we should act, and where to begin (Sari & Najicha, 2022). We need to prominently emphasise that with the values of Pancasila as the nation's identity, individuals embodying these values shall live in tolerance to religious or ethnic diversities. Pancasila, as a philosophical system, is fundamentally a system of knowledge. This knowledge serves as a basic guideline for Indonesians in understanding the reality of the universe, humanity, society, the nation, the state, and the meaning of life. It provides a foundation for solving life's challenges (Kaelan, 2010).

We found how political elites in Indonesia exploit the political arena through mass media by spreading identity political propaganda. This study also seeks to uncover the agenda-setting behind the widespread media coverage of identity politics. Misinformation often peaks during elections, as competing factions deploy fabricated narratives to sway public opinion, undermine opponents, or discredit institutions like the General Elections Commission (KPU). Narratives of hope and hatred are especially effective in mobilising emotions and shaping perceptions, as seen during Indonesia's 2019 and ongoing 2024 election cycles. Such practices can degrade public trust and destabilise political processes (Belinda et al., 2024). In Indonesia,

misinformation often intersects with sensitive cultural and religious identities. False narratives exploiting ethnic or religious differences can inflame tensions, especially when embedded in campaign materials or amplified by influencers on social media platforms (Rianto, 2020).

The findings indicate that political elites view identity politics as a potent tool to undermine their rivals' popularity and electability or to gain public support. Suherman et al. (2020) argue that ethnicity and religion are two key issues frequently included in the elites' identity politics agenda in Indonesia, given the strong presence of primordialism and sectarianism in society. This environment makes it easy to win public sympathy, incite anger, and stir mass sentiment by propagating ethnic and religious issues. Identity politics is a segment of a social movement arising in response to a country's economic and political conditions, aiming for recognition from other groups. In political science, identity politics is a relatively new concept and remains a topic of debate as scholars seek to define it, even though the term "political identity" has been discussed in the philosophical realm for a long time. According to Chen & Urminsky (2019), identity politics is crucial in influencing individuals' political decisions and behaviours.

Multicultural democracy theorists build on Habermas's classic articulation of the public-sphere concept. Like Habermas, they emphasise the importance of social settings where people can openly and self-critically debate issues and revise their opinions "publicly" in Habermas's sense. However, multicultural adaptations of the public-sphere concept replace the idea of a single, generic sphere with multiple public spheres, highlighting the voices of diverse identity groups rather than the generic citizen voice in Habermas's original formulation (Lichterman, 1999). In Indonesia's context of identity politics, there is a perceived emergence of potential conflicts between religion and the state. Political elites in Indonesia are particularly inclined to utilise religion as a powerful tool to secure electoral support. Religion plays a significant role in shaping political engagement. While identity politics is permissible within a democratic framework, its excessive use can be harmful, especially in Indonesia's diverse society encompassing various races, ethnicities, and religions.

The 2014 and 2019 presidential elections are prominent examples of how religious identity has influenced Indonesian politics. In both elections, the contest between Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Prabowo Subianto showcased the increasing use of religious identity as a political tool. During the 2014 election, Jokowi, a Javanese Muslim with a background as a furniture maker and the mayor of Solo, represented a break from the military and elite political dynasties. Prabowo, a former general with ties to the Suharto regime, positioned himself as a strongman leader. During the campaign, Jokowi faced accusations of being a Christian and of having Chinese ancestry, both of which were used to undermine his candidacy in a predominantly Muslim country. Despite these attacks, Jokowi won the election, but the campaign highlighted the potency of religious identity in mobilising voters (Anam & Somantri, 2020).

Again, the 2019 election saw a rematch between Jokowi and Prabowo. This time, religious identity played an even more prominent role. Jokowi chose Ma'ruf Amin, a conservative Islamic cleric and the head of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), as his running mate to counter accusations of being insufficiently Islamic. Prabowo, meanwhile, allied with various Islamist groups, including the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and the 212 movement, which had organised mass protests against Jakarta's Christian governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) in 2016. The election campaign was marked by polarisation and the use of religious rhetoric. Jokowi's decision to partner with Ma'ruf Amin was a strategic move to appeal to conservative Muslim voters and neutralise attacks on his religious credentials. Prabowo's alliances with Islamist groups underscored the mobilising power of religious identity. Although Jokowi won re-election, the campaign deepened divisions and raised concerns about the entrenchment of religious identity in politics (Lane, 2019).

Political actors increasingly use religious identity as an electoral strategy, forming alliances with religious leaders and groups to secure votes. In a scenario where all political parties have similar views on socioeconomic, political, and socio-cultural programs, and only minor differences exist, political competition must find other ways to distinguish itself, particularly nationally. It is unsurprising that "identity issues" are utilised for this purpose. In modern political culture, where parties draw their core support from different regions, geo-cultural identities, often intertwined with religion, can become prominent. The past decade of decentralisation may have further encouraged geo-cultural identity politics.

Many scholars contend that Indonesia's democracy has experienced a decline, moving toward an illiberal direction, and has reignited nationalist-Islamic ideological polarisation fueled by idealised recollections of the past (Ulum, 2020). This trend can marginalise secular and moderate political voices, causing the policy agenda to prioritise religious considerations over broader national interests. Identity politics is inherently intricate, involving political interests and ideological concerns. Addressing identity politics can be approached through cosmopolitan multiculturalism, fostering a society where cosmopolitanism reduces the emphasis on identity. In such a society, cultural boundaries are minimised, freeing individuals and groups from being solely defined by specific cultural affiliations. This approach prioritises freedom, enabling active engagement in intellectual pursuits and the unrestricted development of each individual's cultural life.

Furthermore, we should consider Pancasila for better Indonesian politics. The five main ideals of the Indonesian worldview should guide us to understand that politics should be viewed as a means to become better individuals, not simply a struggle for mundane power. Here, we analyse how Pancasila's ideal can counter identity politics. Religion, historically a source of intolerance in some contexts, plays a significant role in promoting tolerance and social cohesion, particularly in Indonesia. This dual role is influenced by how religious values are interpreted and integrated into societal and cultural frameworks. In Indonesia, a country with immense cultural and religious diversity, religion is a unifying force. The state ideology, Pancasila, emphasises belief in God alongside principles of unity, justice, and tolerance, fostering an inclusive framework for coexistence among various religious groups. This has been critical in promoting religious moderation, which seeks to avoid extremes while emphasising balance and coexistence (Hutabarat, 2023). The principle of "wasathiyah" (moderation) in Islam, for instance, reflects this balance, advocating for harmony in beliefs, actions, and social relations, thereby mitigating radical tendencies and encouraging communal integration.

Local wisdom and traditions also play a pivotal role in strengthening religious tolerance in Indonesia. In regions like villages, local cultural values and religious teachings have fostered mutual respect and harmonious relationships among diverse religious communities. Traditional practices, including shared rituals and festivals, act as social glue, enhancing trust and cohesion across different faiths. Government and civil society initiatives further bolster religion's role in fostering tolerance. Educational programs that promote multiculturalism and religious moderation have been instrumental in addressing prejudices and preventing radicalism. Organisations and grassroots movements have worked collaboratively to spread messages of peace and mutual respect.

Understanding religious pluralism and fostering social harmony is essential for enabling peaceful coexistence among diverse religious groups. Analysing key factors such as interfaith dialogue, collaborative efforts, and mutual respect can help identify effective strategies to promote understanding and minimise conflict. These efforts lay the groundwork for creating initiatives encouraging tolerance and unity in pluralistic societies (Arifianto & Santo, 2020). While challenges persist—such as political manipulation of religious identities and the influence of disruptive ideologies—the Indonesian experience demonstrates how religion, when grounded in moderation and local wisdom, can be a powerful source of tolerance and social unity. Tolerance in Indonesia remains strong, as demonstrated by survey results

highlighting positive attitudes toward tolerance during the 2019 elections (Sakti, 2022). Despite this, challenges persist in addressing issues related to religious, political, and ethnic differences. Election periods often see heightened tensions, with conflicts arising from campaign materials containing elements of SARA (Ethnicity, Religion, Race, and Intergroup) or hate speech, as noted by the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu, 2020). Resolving these issues is essential for maintaining and enhancing social harmony. This dual potential underscores the importance of nurturing inclusive religious interpretations and cultural practices to strengthen societal bonds.

The first principle of Pancasila recognises the importance of belief in God, but it is not exclusively tied to any single religion. In this way, Pancasila acknowledges Indonesia's multi-religious nature—where Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and indigenous beliefs coexist—and provides a framework for mutual respect and tolerance. In contrast to the exclusivist tendencies of religious identity politics, which may privilege one religious community over others, Pancasila's pluralistic view fosters coexistence. By emphasising that the state guarantees freedom of religion for all its citizens, Pancasila affirms that no single religious identity should dominate the political sphere. It reinforces that public officials and institutions must act as representatives of all Indonesians, irrespective of their faith.

The second principle of Pancasila, which calls for a just and civilised humanity, transcends religious, ethnic, and racial divides by affirming that all humans are equal and deserving of respect. This is a powerful counter to identity politics, which tends to marginalise or stigmatise those outside the dominant group. Through this lens, Pancasila rejects the notion that one's group identity (e.g., ethnicity or religion) should determine one's rights or social standing. It promotes a social and political equality vision where citizens are valued for their humanity rather than their group affiliations. The concept of humanity (*Kemanusiaan yang Adil dan Beradab*), as enshrined in the second sila of Indonesia's foundational ideology, Pancasila, offers a robust framework to overcome sectarianism by fostering mutual respect, unity, and social justice. The second sila emphasises "just and civilised humanity," which mandates respecting and upholding human dignity across all cultural, religious, and ethnic divides. This principle establishes that all individuals deserve equal treatment under the law and within society regardless of their identity. This foundation directly counters sectarian tendencies by rejecting any form of discrimination or dehumanisation based on religion or ethnicity. This aligns with Indonesia's constitutional protections for human rights, which mandate freedom of religion and equality before the law (Sofjan, 2018).

Pancasila's principle of "unity in diversity" (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*) emphasises the integration of Indonesia's diverse cultural and religious communities under a unified national identity. The second sila fosters ethical conduct and mutual collaboration, critical for preserving harmony in a pluralistic society. Focusing on shared values rather than differences challenges and counters sectarian ideologies that thrive on division and exclusion. Moreover, the second sila establishes a moral framework that rejects behaviours undermining human dignity, encouraging individuals and communities to act with justice and compassion. Interfaith dialogues and inclusive policy-making rooted in Pancasila help alleviate sectarian tensions and nurture peaceful coexistence (Wahyudin et al., 2019). By balancing religious freedom with national unity, Pancasila provides a framework for integrating religious values into public life without allowing one group to dominate. This balance is essential in a diverse nation like Indonesia, where various religious groups coexist (Tanamal & Siagian, 2020).

The third principle, *Persatuan Indonesia* (Unity of Indonesia), is the most direct counter to identity politics. This principle urges Indonesians to place their national identity above narrower group loyalties. By fostering a sense of Indonesianness, Pancasila encourages a form of patriotism that is not based on religion or ethnicity but on shared national values. In contrast, identity politics seeks to fragment this unity by emphasising differences. Pancasila's emphasis on national Unity encourages Indonesians to celebrate diversity while remaining united under

a common national identity. The principle is a call to avoid the divisiveness that can emerge from identity-based political movements and to remember the collective good of the nation as a whole. Pancasila is a foundational ideology that balances fostering national unity while avoiding the dangers of ultranationalism. Its principles emphasise inclusion, humanism, and democratic values, which can unite Indonesia's diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious communities without succumbing to exclusivity or aggressive nationalism (Rizapoor, 2024).

The principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity") embodies Pancasila's commitment to pluralism, encouraging mutual respect and peaceful coexistence among Indonesia's myriad groups. This inclusivity is a counterweight to populist tendencies that might prioritise homogeneity or suppress minority voices. Instead, it highlights shared goals and values, such as social justice and collective welfare, ensuring every group feels represented in the national identity. Pancasila's fourth principle emphasises the importance of democracy and deliberation. In this model, political decisions are not dictated by narrow identity groups but through consultation and consensus among representatives. This approach directly counters the factionalism inherent in identity politics, which tends to pit different groups against one another in a zero-sum game of power (Arjon, 2018). The use of ethnicity and religion was practised to gain victory in the contestation of power politics in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the Presidential election in 2019 (Susilowati & Yunus, 2019). Concerning Fukuyama (2018), identity-based politics in the modern democratic landscape is one of the threats to democratic life.

Instead of divisive competition, Pancasila promotes democratic engagement based on the search for common ground. It advocates for a politics of inclusion, where different groups can express their perspectives. Still, the ultimate goal is collective decision-making that benefits the broader society, not just specific identity groups. Deliberative democracy fosters platforms for open and inclusive discussions where diverse groups, regardless of identity, can voice their perspectives. This counters the divisive narratives often perpetuated by identity-based campaigns, as seen in Indonesia's elections, such as the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial race (N. N. Illiyyun, 2023). Engaging in structured dialogues minimises polarisation and creates opportunities for shared understanding.

Shifting the political focus from identity-based appeals to substantive policy discussions is critical. Indonesian elections have been criticised for prioritising identity over programmatic issues. Deliberative practices emphasise evaluating candidates based on their proposed solutions rather than their affiliations, steering voters toward more issue-oriented politics (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Deliberative democracy also relies on civil society organisations, religious institutions, and community leaders as intermediaries to mediate disputes and promote inter-group cooperation. In Indonesia, organisations promoting Pancasila values and pluralism play a crucial role in diffusing tensions and addressing grievances that identity politics might exploit; this formula requires moderation and political ethics undertaken by these organisations. Pancasila aligns with deliberative democracy by advocating unity in diversity and mutual respect. Anchoring political discourse in Pancasila's principles can delegitimise identity-based appeals that threaten national cohesion. Finally, Pancasila's fifth principle, Social Justice for All Indonesians, ensures that economic opportunities and resources are distributed equitably across the population. Identity politics often thrives when certain groups feel marginalised or excluded from economic and political power. By promoting social justice, Pancasila addresses these underlying grievances. It emphasises that every Indonesian—regardless of ethnic, religious, or regional background—deserves access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. In doing so, Pancasila helps to defuse the sense of exclusion that identity politics can exploit.

## Conclusion

Pancasila, as the foundational ideology of Indonesia, provides a powerful framework to counteract the divisive effects of identity politics and populism on national cohesion. Rooted in

the principles of unity in diversity, social justice, and shared humanity, Pancasila emphasises the collective good over sectarian or group interests. Promoting equality, tolerance, and mutual respect among Indonesia's diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural communities unify against the polarisation driven by identity-based politics. Applying Pancasila in political practices requires a commitment to its values in governance, law enforcement, and public discourse. Upholding these principles ensures that political campaigns and leadership reflect democratic ideals without exploiting religious or ethnic identities. By integrating Pancasila into education, policymaking, and legal frameworks, Indonesia can strengthen its social fabric and mitigate the threats posed by populism and identity politics, preserving national unity and harmony in its democratic processes.

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### **Authors' contributions**

FA, RT, and SW contributed to analysing the problems, finding solutions and interpreting issues related to this topic. All authors designed the research, conducted the study, analysed the final results and contributed to preparing the final manuscript. MKA supervised, provided direction, and verified the methods, data processing, research results, and language.

### **Competing interests**

The authors have declared no competing interests.