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Religious Identity Politics: A Necessity or a Need to Avoid

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of religious identity politics often arises in the context of multicultural societies, such as in Indonesia, where religion is used as a tool to achieve political goals. The formulation of this research problem is the extent to which religious identity politics affects social stability and harmony in a plural society. The aim is to analyze the role of religious identity politics in socio-political dynamics, both as a catalyst for social justice and as a trigger for polarization. This research uses a literature study method with a descriptive-analytical approach to review relevant academic literature. The theory of pluralism and majority domination is used as an analytical framework to understand religious identity politics' potential benefits and risks. The results show that religious identity politics can be an effective tool to fight for the rights of marginalized groups. However, its excessive use can exacerbate inter-group polarization and conflict. In conclusion, religious identity politics should be managed with the principles of inclusivity and policies oriented toward the common good to prevent social fragmentation.

Keywords: Identity Politics, Religion, Must, Avoided.

I. Introduction

Religious identity politics refers to the use of religious identity as a basis for gaining political power or influencing public policy. In religious identity politics, certain groups define themselves based on religious beliefs and use that identity to advance their political, legal, and social positions. Religion, in this context, becomes a determining factor in how individuals or groups view the political world, mobilize support, and participate in the political process. The use of religious identity politics is often seen in issues concerning public morality, sharia-based legislation, and inter-religious conflict in the political context. Religious identity politics became increasingly prominent with the rise of religious movements in many countries in the 20th century. One of the backgrounds to the emergence of religious identity politics was a reaction to secularization and modernization which were considered to erode religious values in public life. In many Muslim-majority countries, for example, the rise of political Islam is often seen as an effort to enforce Islamic law in the public and governmental spheres. This phenomenon also occurs in non-Muslim countries, such as the rise of conservative Christianity in the United States or Hindutva in India which uses religious identity as the basis for political mobilization.

In Indonesia, religious identity politics has become a very relevant issue, especially in the context of general elections and public policy. For example, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election gave rise to a massive narrative of religious identity politics when religious issues were used to influence voter preferences.



In some cases, religious identity politics was used to strengthen unity among certain religious groups, but it also has the potential to cause division and polarization in a multi-religious society. Therefore, it is important to understand how religious identity plays a role in modern political structures and its impact on social harmony. Religious identity politics is often seen as a legitimate means to fight for religious rights in government. On the other hand, there are concerns that religious identity politics can lead to exclusivity, discrimination, or even inter-religious conflict. This has led to debates about whether religious identity politics is a necessity to protect the rights of religious groups, or whether it should be avoided because of the risk of dividing national unity in a pluralistic society. Based on the explanation above, religious identity politics can be an important tool to fight for religious freedom and maintain public morality. However, its excessive and uncontrolled use has the potential to widen social gaps and damage national cohesion. Therefore, the use of religious identity politics must be done carefully, prioritizing equality and peace amidst diversity.

II. Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on religious identity politics highlight its dual role as both a mobilizing force and a potential source of social fragmentation. According to Casanova (2011), the resurgence of religion in the public sphere challenges the long-held assumption that modernization inevitably leads to secularization. Religion, rather than retreating into the private domain, increasingly re-enters political discourse as a source of moral authority and collective identity. Similarly, Fox (2018) argues that religious identity politics often emerges in response to perceived marginalization, where religious groups seek political recognition and policy influence to safeguard their values and interests. In the context of Muslim-majority societies, scholars such as Esposito and Voll (2001) explain political Islam as a form of identity politics that integrates religious norms with governance aspirations, especially in reaction to Western political models. Meanwhile, studies in non-Muslim contexts show comparable dynamics. For instance, Norris and Inglehart (2019) demonstrate how conservative religious movements in democratic societies mobilize voters by framing political issues in moral and theological terms. In Indonesia, several studies emphasize that religious identity politics is shaped by the country's pluralistic structure and democratic transition. Mietzner (2020) notes that electoral competition has intensified the instrumentalization of religious symbols, particularly during local and national elections. These studies collectively suggest that while religious identity politics can strengthen political participation and representation, it also carries significant risks for social cohesion if not managed within inclusive and democratic frameworks.

III. Research Method

This research methodology uses a library research approach to analyze the phenomenon of religious identity politics. Library research was chosen because it allows researchers to review various relevant literature sources, including books, journal articles, research reports, and official documents related to religious identity politics. By collecting and analyzing information from various sources, this study aims to understand how religious identity plays a role in political dynamics, as well as to explore arguments for and against the use of religious identity in a political context. The data collection process was carried out by identifying and categorizing relevant literature sources. The researcher conducted a systematic search in academic databases, libraries, and online sources to find works that discuss the issue of religious identity politics. After collecting the data, the researcher conducted a critical analysis of the content found, focusing on key themes, methodologies used in previous studies, and conclusions drawn. This analysis aims to identify patterns that emerge in discussions about religious identity politics and to evaluate the contribution of each source to a broader understanding of the issue. The results of this literature research are expected to provide in-depth insights into religious identity politics, as well as its implications for society and public policy. By integrating various perspectives from existing literature, this study aims to present a comprehensive picture of the challenges and opportunities faced in the context of religious identity politics. In addition, this study will also

provide recommendations for policy makers and other stakeholders to manage religious identity politics wisely, so as to create social harmony and prevent potential conflicts that may arise due to differences in identity.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1. The Concept of Religious Identity Politics

Religious identity politics refers to the use of religion as a tool to mobilize political support by highlighting religious values and identities. Religious identity is used as an instrument to distinguish between 'us' and 'them' in the political sphere. This often creates strong dividing lines between groups in society, where religion becomes a major component in the political decision-making process. Theoretically, religious identity politics allows religious groups to fight for their rights that may be marginalized in societies that are predominantly of other religions or secular. This is seen in various political movements around the world, such as the rise of religious-based parties in the Middle East and South Asia. In many countries, religion has become a strong basis for moral legitimacy for public policy. However, the use of religious identity politics also risks creating exclusivity and polarization. Religion as a political identity can weaken broader social ties with other societies, especially in countries with diverse religious populations. Therefore, while religion can strengthen political engagement, it is important to ensure that its use does not create excessive tension in society. Religion as a political identity enables certain groups to fight for social justice, but if not managed carefully, religious identity politics can deepen polarization and exclusivity in plural societies.

4.2. Related Theories

Pluralism theory argues that religious identity politics can exist harmoniously in a multireligious society, assuming that all religious groups have equal rights to participate in the political process. This theory suggests that even though religious groups have different values and outlooks on life, they can live side by side and respect each other. This allows for social and political inclusion in a pluralistic context. However, the theory of majority dominance highlights the potential dangers of religious identity politics in societies dominated by a particular religious group. In such societies, the majority group tends to use religion to strengthen its control over political and social institutions, so that religious minorities are marginalized. This phenomenon often occurs in countries with governments that lean towards a particular religion, resulting in discriminatory policies against minorities. The tension between pluralism and majority dominance shows that religious identity politics must be managed carefully. In situations where the majority group is too dominant, conflict can escalate, especially if the minority group feels that their rights are being violated. Therefore, the pluralist approach must be protected to maintain balance in a multicultural society. Although pluralism can support harmony between religious groups, the dominance of the majority in religious identity politics tends to create imbalances that can threaten social and political stability.

4.3. Religious Identity Politics in History

Religious identity politics has played a significant role in world political history, both as a revolutionary force and as a tool to maintain the status quo. The most prominent example is the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, where Islamic identity was used as the basis for a revolutionary movement against a government that was considered secular and pro-Western. In this case, religion succeeded in forming a new political order based on Islamic law. In Indonesia, religious identity politics has been seen since the era of independence, when various religious groups participated in the formation of the state. During the New Order, religious identity politics was suppressed by a more secular regime, but it became stronger again in the Reformation era with the emergence of Islamic parties that played a role in Indonesian democracy. The use of

religion in politics has become a means for these groups to fight for religious values in public policy. However, history also shows that religious identity politics can cause conflict, especially in pluralistic societies. When religion is used to mobilize the masses and create polarization, as seen in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, the potential for social rifts increases. Therefore, the use of religion in politics must be accompanied by an inclusive and tolerant approach. Therefore, it can be understood that history shows that religious identity politics can be a catalyst for political change, but its unbalanced implementation can lead to an exclusive regime and reduce diversity in government.

4.4. Identity Politics Between Necessity or Need to be Avoided

Identity politics is considered a necessity especially for marginalized or minority groups, whether in terms of religion, ethnicity, or gender. For them, identity politics is an important means to fight for rights that are often ignored by the majority. In a society that tends to be unequal, identity politics gives voice to those who are not represented in public policy. Minority groups use their identities to build internal solidarity, strengthen their bargaining position in politics, and gain more equal rights. In addition, identity politics also helps maintain diversity in society. By recognizing and giving space to various identities, society can better appreciate the plurality of cultures, religions, and values that exist within them. In this context, identity politics is not a threat, but rather a legitimate tool to maintain diversity and promote social justice. Groups that advocate identity politics often emphasize the importance of recognizing differences as part of a healthy democracy. However, the necessity of identity politics is not only limited to minorities, but is also relevant in the context of the majority who want to maintain their traditional values in the face of modernization or secularization. In many countries, including Indonesia, religious identity politics is used to maintain public morality that is considered threatened by foreign values. In this case, identity politics functions as a mechanism to maintain the continuity of culture and religious values that have long been rooted.

On the other hand, identity politics is often criticized for its potential to divide society, especially in multicultural countries. When politics is based on group identity, whether religious, racial, or ethnic, society can be divided into opposing blocs. This kind of polarization can weaken the sense of national togetherness and undermine social unity. In this context, identity politics can be a threat to national integration, because it emphasizes differences rather than similarities. In addition, identity politics can trigger exclusivity, where a group feels superior and claims privileges based on their identity. This can lead to discrimination against other groups with different beliefs or identities. For example, in many cases, the majority religion uses identity politics to dominate public spaces, so that religious minorities feel marginalized. This phenomenon is seen in several countries where identity politics is used to strengthen discriminatory policies against minorities. Furthermore, in an increasingly global and connected world, identity politics can reinforce isolation and hinder intercultural dialogue. When groups focus on their identity differences, the space for negotiation and compromise becomes narrower. As a result, public policies tend to be based on the interests of certain groups alone, without considering the broader interests of society as a whole. Therefore, identity politics should be avoided if it risks creating social segregation and triggering prolonged conflict.

Identity politics, especially in the context of religion, is an important tool for marginalized groups to fight for social justice and the recognition of their rights. On the one hand, it provides an opportunity for minority groups to have a voice in political processes that are often dominated by the majority. In complex and multicultural societies, identity politics serves as a mechanism to counter marginalization and strengthen solidarity between group members, which can lead to more inclusive and equitable policies. In other words, identity politics can redress the imbalance of power in democratic systems by providing more equitable access to marginalized groups. However, on the other hand, identity politics carries a high risk of causing social divisions and exacerbating polarization, especially when used exclusively to claim privileges for a particular group. When identity politics focuses too much on differences in religious, ethnic, or cultural identity, it can reduce the space for dialogue and compromise between groups, thereby reinforcing social segregation. This has the potential to damage national unity and hinder social integration in a multicultural society. When

identity politics encourages exclusivity, the rights of minorities or other groups can be neglected, which can ultimately trigger prolonged conflict. Thus, it is understandable that identity politics, although important for fighting for social justice, must be managed carefully. The use of identity politics must be accompanied by the principle of inclusivity and openness to cross-group dialogue. Otherwise, uncontrolled identity politics can lead to social fragmentation that threatens stability and harmony in society.

4.5. Policy Analysis in Identity Politics

In comparative analysis, identity politics has two sides. On the one hand, it is considered important to fight for the rights of minority groups that are marginalized in political structures. These groups use their identities to strengthen solidarity and increase their influence in political decision-making. Examples such as the civil rights movement in the United States and the feminist movement show how identity can be a means to achieve social equality. However, critics of identity politics emphasize the potential for polarization and exclusivity that can damage social unity. In Indonesia, for example, religious identity politics during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election caused tensions between religious groups and damaged social harmony. This shows that identity politics can create segregation and exacerbate differences, which risks causing prolonged conflict. From the perspective of Islamic thought, identity politics can be in line with the principle of justice as long as it does not trigger division. The principle of al-'adl (justice) demands that every group receive equal rights, without discrimination. Identity politics is acceptable if it is used to fight for the rights of oppressed minorities or underrepresented groups. However, if identity politics is used to express exclusivity or discriminate against other groups, this is contrary to Islamic teachings that encourage unity and togetherness.

Unity (al-wahdah) in Islam is a principle that must not be violated. Identity politics that divide Muslims or society in general is contrary to the value of unity. In the Indonesian context, this is reflected in Pancasila which prioritizes unity in diversity. Therefore, identity politics can only be accepted if it fights for the welfare of all people, not just the interests of certain groups. To practice identity politics wisely without triggering conflict, there needs to be a balance between respect for identity and openness to cross-group dialogue. The first step is to ensure that identity politics is not used as a tool to express exclusivity or superiority, but rather is used to achieve equality and justice for all groups, both majority and minority. In this regard, inclusive political education and fostering tolerance between groups are essential. Second, identity politics must always be accompanied by a dialogical and collaborative approach. Instead of emphasizing existing differences, political actors need to promote values that connect different groups, such as equal rights, freedom of religion, and equality before the law. By placing dialogue as the foundation of identity politics, the space for conflict can be minimized, and social cohesion can be strengthened. Third, policies resulting from identity politics must be oriented towards the public interest, not the narrow interests of a single group. Every policy based on identity must consider its impact on the wider community and ensure that no group is disadvantaged. The government and stakeholders must ensure that identity politics does not damage the social order, but instead enriches diversity and strengthens social solidarity. Thus, the wise practice of identity politics demands a balance between respect for the identity of a particular group and a commitment to maintaining justice, unity, and the common good.

V. Conclusion

Identity politics, especially in the context of religion, has two opposing sides. On the one hand, identity politics is necessary to fight for the rights of marginalized or unrepresented groups in the political process. It is an important tool for achieving social justice, strengthening internal group solidarity, and ensuring that all citizens have equal rights. However, on the other hand, excessive identity politics risks creating polarization, exclusivity, and conflict between groups, which can undermine social unity and stability in a multicultural society. From an Islamic perspective, identity politics is acceptable as long as it is in accordance with the principles of justice, unity, and the welfare of the people. However, if identity politics

actually causes division or injustice, then this must be avoided. Therefore, the practice of identity politics must be carried out wisely, through cross-group dialogue, inclusion, and policies that are oriented towards the public welfare. Therefore, identity politics is not something that must be absolutely accepted or rejected, but rather needs to be managed carefully. With the right approach, identity politics can strengthen justice and equality without damaging social cohesion.

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