



PRAKSIS
THE JOURNAL OF ASIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

ISSN: 2815-1046

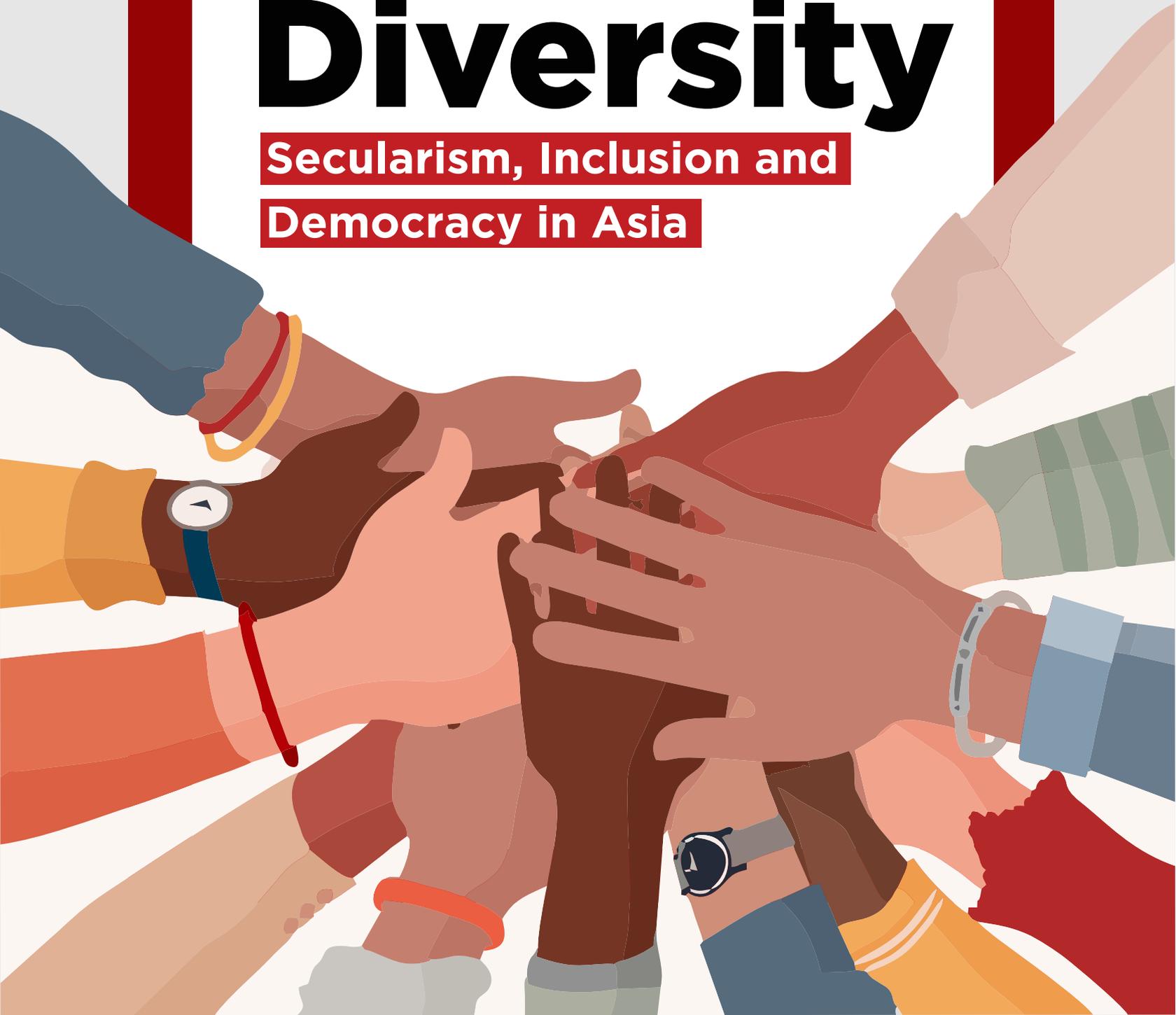
Volume 2

Issue 1

August 2022

Unity in Diversity

Secularism, Inclusion and
Democracy in Asia





PRAKSIS is a semiannual publication of the Network of Social Democracy in Asia (Socdem Asia). It seeks to combine theory and practice by providing cogent analyses to inform the strategy of the progressive movement and help shape the policy direction that should guide the region's governments.

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By: Lucia Ratih Kusumadewi

In the Vortex of Identity Politics

The Decline of Democracy in Post-Reformation Indonesia

Even before independence, identity has been a significant issue in Indonesian society. The construction and meaning of being “Indonesian” have shifted from time to time, under the influence of various structural factors, both internally and externally. The history of Indonesia thereby leads this nation into the vortex of identity politics, where identity is sold by political actors as a commodity to gain power and economic resources. How has identity been defined and used for political purposes? Does this situation endanger democracy and social integration in Indonesia? What can progressives do to face the issue of identity? This article will answer these three questions.

Identity as Politics

In Indonesia today, discussions regarding identity often lead to the question of religious identity. This is not to deny the significance of other identities such as race, ethnicity or gender, especially since Indonesia is known to be a pluralist society. However, for the political elites, religious identity seems to be the most interesting form of identity. It has, in fact, become a very useful instrument for achieving and/or maintaining political power. Its importance is not only in the political sphere, but in the larger social body as well. At present, religious identity is the dominant factor in the construction of meaning, compared to other identities such as race, ethnicity or gender.

“Religious identity is the dominant factor in the construction of meaning, compared to other identities such as race, ethnicity or gender.

Image: www.eastasiaforum.org



As a background, we can revisit the pre-independence era of this nation's history. John Sydenham Furnivall in his book *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (2010), described the Dutch East Indies as an example of a *plural society* — a society where two or more elements live side by side without one united political purpose. During that time, identities organized along racial, ethnic and religious lines intersected with political and class domination. Europeans were at the top of the social structure and ruled over the rest. Meanwhile, native peoples (who were perceived to be the poorest and completely dominated) were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. At the middle were the 'eastern strangers' (people of Chinese descent) who lived through trading and sought proximity to the rulers.

Unfortunately, the legacy of this *plural society* still haunts Indonesia from time to time. Ever since independence, the political elites who were called as the nation's 'founding fathers' formulated the "Pancasila" ideology as the common political objective of the new nation-state. However, "Pancasila" has hardly been diffused into the larger political sphere. Legitimate governments have occasionally been disturbed by political forces that aim to reconstruct the notion of Indonesia. Indonesian nationalism has also been questioned with the strengthening of identity groups, that has often led to ethnocentrism and fundamentalism.

After eliminating Islamic-based movements followed by the bloody anti-communist purge of 1965 (Cribb 2002), political turbulence was temporarily neutralized by Suharto's iron-fisted regime. The jargon of political stability for economic development became a legitimizing tool for various human rights violations. The authoritarian New Order regime silenced any anti-government movement, including Islamic-based movements. Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936)¹ inspired, not only the colonial government, but also the New Order regime, in eliminating 'political Islam' while giving space to 'religious Islam' (Benda, 1983).

The Reformation Period of 1998 created an ambiguous situation for Indonesia. On one hand, it was a moment of victory for democracy. On the other hand, the euphoria of freedom gave way to tensions and rage which eventually boomeranged, killing democracy. Various bloody conflicts among ethno-religious groups occurred from mid-1996 to 2005, which showed the vulnerability of

nationalism and social integration to politico-economic crisis (Bertrand 2003; Kusumadewi 2012). Meanwhile, along with the rise of the transnational Islamic movement, Islamism in Indonesia emerged as a new power that is challenging the nation's political objective and social order. Apart from Islamism's long-term objective of turning the country into an Islamic state, Indonesia has also become a target of terrorism and radicalism.

The Rise of Islamism and the Challenge to Democracy

In the two decades after reformation, Islamization has changed the face of Indonesian society, largely characterized by the strengthening of conservatism (Bruinessen 2013), fundamentalism and sectarianism (Ricklefs 2012), and Islamic commodification (Fealy 2008). Robert Hefner also cites the emergence of a 'religionization' process with the disappearance of what he calls 'non-standard Islam' (2014) or what Clifford Geertz defined as '*abangan*' in his book *The Religion of Java* (1996). In this case, '*santri*' or students from Islamic schools are giving new meaning to Islam, which identify piety as the overriding character of a moralistic person. It seems that more and more Muslims in Indonesia are refusing to be considered "non-pious." Piety is not only demonstrated by obedience to religious rituals but also in the use of conservative symbols such as the hijab, halal food, etc.

The strengthening of conservative Islamic identity has given birth to a new phenomenon which Vedi Hadiz (2014) calls as "new Islamic populism." This new populism is understood as an unequal alliance among classes that is united by a narrative based on the notion of a similar fate. In populism, the dominant elites use gap issues such as injustice and religious morality to generate greater support, overcome various internal differences and defeat their political opponents. Islamic populism was visible during the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections when presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto attacked Joko Widodo using identity issues. New Islamic populism was also visible during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, when populist elites organized a massive demonstration called "Action to Defend Islam" (*Aksi Bela Islam*) to oust Basuki Tjahaja Purnama — the incumbent governor whose Christian-Chinese origin was considered as an insult to Islam.

¹Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje was a Dutch scholar who served as an adviser on native affairs for the Dutch East Indies colonial government — *the editor*.



Image: www.thejakartapost.com

“The strengthening of conservative Islamic identity has given birth to a new phenomenon called new Islamic populism.

At the same time, at the level of society, relations among various groups are becoming conflictual. The Center for Islamic and Social Studies (PPIM) of the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta (2022) and the Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (2022) both reported that the number of citizens who are intolerant and close to radicalism have been increasing. Cases of intolerance, discrimination and even persecution happened to minority groups as reported by The Wahid Institute (2020) and Setara Institute (2020). Examples include restrictions on the construction of churches, the obligatory use of hijab, as well as the persecution of Ahmadiyya, Shia and other minority groups. Recently, Ade Armando, a scholar who is openly critical of Islamic groups, was attacked and stripped by protesters in Jakarta for allegedly insulting religion.

Regardless of the lurking threat of social disintegration, we need to see the performance of the Joko Widodo government in the last nine years. The first half of Joko Widodo's administration focused on infrastructure and economic development. However, until now, much work has yet to be done, especially in addressing issues involving human rights violations, intolerance and protection of minority groups. In the second half of his presidency, which only has two more years left, these agenda have not yet been resolved. The focus still revolves around pandemic response, opening up to foreign investments, and completing massive infrastructures projects, which includes moving the state capital to East Kalimantan. Therefore, some critics consider Joko Widodo's government as neoliberal.

Beside its neoliberal character, Joko Widodo's administration is also marked by its strong oligarchic character, wherein political elites 'unite' to gain and secure their own power. This is reflected in the absence of any strong political opposition. Even Prabowo Subianto, who was Joko Widodo's opponent in the 2014 and 2019 elections, was eventually appointed as Minister of Defense. The government's oligarchic character is also reflected in its repressive handling of critics² and opposition groups, such as the 212 Movement, the 2019 protest actions against the curtailment of powers³ of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), the 2020 student demonstrations against the draft Omnibus Law, and more recently, student demonstrations opposing proposals to extend Joko Widodo's presidency to three terms.

²The 212 Movement or the Jakarta 2016 protest was a mass protest led by Islamic groups demanding the ouster of Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok — *the editor*.

³The protests were triggered by a proposal from the Lower House requiring the KPK to first get their approval before the latter can initiate any surveillance, arrest, or confiscation of property — *the editor*.

⁴Supporters of the Omnibus Law claim that it will promote investments. Opponents, on the other hand, assert that it will dismantle safeguards for workers' welfare and environmental protection — *the editor*.



Image: www.en.shafaqna.com

“Indonesian democracy is facing simultaneous challenges from two powerful forces — illiberal Islamic groups on one hand, and the united oligarchy embedded in state institutions on the other.

Given this situation, progressive activists are pessimistic about the future of Indonesian democracy. Scholars even describe the era as a setback for democratization and the comeback of 'illiberal democracy,' wherein leaders are elected through legitimate elections, but the freedoms that citizens have are extremely limited. At the moment, Indonesian democracy is facing simultaneous challenges from two powerful forces — illiberal Islamic groups on one hand, and the united oligarchy embedded in state institutions on the other.

Restoring Democracy Through Multiculturalism

Democratic deepening in Indonesia is not an easy endeavor but it must be undertaken. This process can begin by reviewing the basic political purpose of this nation. There is nothing wrong in continuously reviewing and discussing the nation's basic political purpose in order to improve our vision for the future. The expression “Pancasila without compromise” (*Pancasila harga mati*) is a new form of authoritarianism that tends to halt the

process of social transformation. Scholars, for example, often discuss whether Indonesia can be classified as a secular state or a religion-based state. This confusion stems from the first principle of Pancasila: “Belief in the Almighty God” (*Ke-Tuhanan yang Maha Esa*), which generates various interpretations. If not properly handled, Pancasila's first principle can become an empty space that can be used to legitimize any interest, including those of sectarians and powerful oligarchs who want to benefit from identity politics.

The simple but significant question has been expressed by French sociologist Alain Touraine (1997): “Can we live together, equal and different?” (*Pourrons-nous vivre ensemble égaux et différent?*). This question is important to remind people that living together requires the spirit of diversity, justice and equality; and that a democratic way of life is essential in modern society. Regarding Indonesia, there is an urgent need to reconstruct both the political system and the state to address further democratic backsliding. In this case, multiculturalism, in my opinion, can be a prospective solution.

In political philosophy, multiculturalism is understood as an alternative that offers a governance of 'living together,' and values cultural diversity as a feature of a modern democratic society. Multicultural politics is a political path for societies that are culturally diverse (Parekh, 2002; Kymlicka, 2003). Compared to religion-based politics that is often ethnocentric and authoritarian and to a secular state that is 'blind to differences,' multicultural politics bridges people by addressing the weaknesses of the existing political system. A basic principle of multicultural politics is the recognition and protection of the rights of all cultural groups. By doing so, it is able to advance democracy, justice and universal humanity.

To achieve these goals, progressives must focus on the following points: (1) Multicultural politics can only be realized if the majority (read: dominant) group willingly give up their privileges and share their power. (2) An activist movement is needed to heighten public awareness on multiculturalism. (3) Multicultural consciousness can grow through multicultural education that encourages concrete encounters with other cultures and by valuing mutual respect and toleration. Multicultural education should be understood as a movement for social change. (4) Political and economic structures should be built to support this movement. ■

“Multicultural politics is a political path for societies that are culturally diverse.



Image: www.newmandala.org

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