

Religion and Democracy in Indonesia: Navigating Harmony and Challenges in a Diverse Society

Rev. Dr Jacky Manuputty, Chair of the Christian Communion of Churches, Indonesia

Democracy and religion are often considered incompatible, particularly in contexts where the majority religion holds significant political influence. However, in Indonesia, religion and democracy have developed in parallel—sometimes harmoniously, sometimes in conflict. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority country, but it is not an Islamic state. Its democracy is characterized by religious pluralism, a decentralized political system, and civil society engagement. Since the Reform era began in 1998, Indonesia has undergone significant democratic consolidation. Elections are now held regularly and transparently, freedom of expression has increased, and political parties compete openly. Nevertheless, two decades after the reform, democracy in Indonesia appears to have lost its substance. The transactional behavior of political elites dominates the national landscape of Indonesian democracy, resulting in a relationship between political parties and the people that is no longer ideological or aspirational. On the other hand, political co-optation has occurred in various state institutions that are supposed to be the guardians of democracy, such as the General Election Commission, the Election Supervisory Agency, and even the Constitutional Court. Political parties, as the main pillars of democracy, are experiencing structural fragility and a decline in their representative function. Co-optation by party elites and oligarchs has become a destructive symbiosis. This co-optation is not merely an ethical issue; it has also triggered criminal acts of corruption, the decline of substantive democracy, the perpetuation of a culture of patronage and political dynasties, and the development of natural resource exploitation and social inequality. In this situation, religion remains a double-edged sword: religion is a source of moral legitimacy and social cohesion, but it can also trigger exclusionary politics and persecution of minorities. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the intersection of religion and democracy in Indonesia and how this relationship has evolved.