
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Politics of Religious Pluralism in Indonesia: A Case Study of Indigenous Believers in the Aftermath of 2017 Constitutional Court Decision

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the politics of religious pluralism in Indonesia, focusing on the position of indigenous believers (penghayat Kepercayaan) following Constitutional Court Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016 (2017). Three objectives structure the inquiry: (1) to situate religious pluralism within the historical-normative context of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) as a sociological and constitutional foundation of the Indonesian state; (2) to identify the most prominent issues in the contemporary politics of religious freedom, specifically regulatory inconsistency, the intensification of religious conservatism, and the politicization of religious identity in electoral competition; and (3) to assess the prospects for political policy reform. A systematic review of primary sources, including annual freedom of religion and belief reports, constitutional court documents, and peer-reviewed scholarship, underpins the analysis. The findings reveal a persistent gap between formal legal recognition and substantive equality. While the 2017 ruling removed a clear form of administrative discrimination against indigenous believers, implementation remains contested and uneven, shaped by bureaucratic discretion, social prejudice, and the relational dignity frameworks specific to indigenous cosmologies. The *ummah* narrative, operating through dichotomous framing, emotional contagion via digital media, and victimization rhetoric, has degraded deliberative quality and marginalized minority communities, including indigenous believers. The article argues that durable pluralism requires three interlocking reform agendas: alignment of national regulations with the 1945 Constitution, elimination of discriminatory local regulations, and enforceable prohibitions on the politicization of SARA (ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group sentiment) in elections. These findings carry implications for democratic consolidation, minority rights protection, and the governance of religious diversity in the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy.

KEYWORDS

Religious pluralism; Indigenous believers; Freedom of religion and belief; Identity politics; *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*; Indonesia

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1. Introduction

Indonesia is widely recognized as a plural country across numerous dimensions of ethnicity, religion, race, language, and tradition. This structural condition has led scholars to characterize the country not merely as multicultural but as plural-multicultural, a social formation in which multiple axes of difference intersect without collapsing into a single dominant cleavage (Hefner, 2011). This structural plurality is formally encoded in the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), which functions simultaneously as a constitutional commitment and a cultural aspiration.

Despite that constitutional foundation, the politics of religious pluralism has grown increasingly contested. Data compiled by the SETARA Institute for Democracy and Peace document more than 2,070 incidents and 2,741 violations against freedom of religion and belief within a single decade, amounting to more than seventeen events per month (Halili, 2017b, 2018, 2013; Halili &

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Naipospos, 2016, 2014). The same institution recorded 361 acts of disruption against houses of worship since 2007, affecting Christian congregations, Muslim communities, and practitioners of indigenous and local religions alike (Halili, 2017a). This trajectory reflects a condition that Christian Worldwide Solidarity (2014) has described as pluralism in peril.

Followers of indigenous religions (agama leluhur or kepercayaan) constitute among the most structurally vulnerable groups in this landscape. Their relationship to the Indonesian state has been marked by what Ma'arif (2017) characterizes as a fluctuating and largely exclusionary politics of religion, driven by shifting state ideologies and pressures from organized religious majorities. Constitutional Court Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016 of 2017 constituted a landmark intervention in this history of exclusion. By ruling that indigenous believers could not be compelled to leave the religion column of their national identity cards blank, the Court removed a clear form of legal discrimination (Bagir et al., 2020; Hefner, 2020; Omara & Viri, 2021). Yet research conducted in subsequent years indicates that formal recognition has translated only unevenly into substantive equality.

The context of this decision is inseparable from broader trends in Indonesian democratic politics. The 212 Movement (Aksi Bela Islam) of 2016 to 2017, the intensely polarized 2019 presidential election, and the 2024 presidential contest all demonstrated the power of religious identity narratives to mobilize mass constituencies and reshape political competition (Mietzner, 2020; Situmorang, Umarama, et al., 2025). Scholars including Hadiz V. R (2020) have documented the transformation of Islamic identity politics toward increasingly exclusive and polarizing forms during this period, with direct consequences for minority communities.

Against this background, the present article pursues three objectives: (1) to situate religious pluralism within the historical-normative context of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*; (2) to identify the most prominent issues structuring the contemporary politics of religious freedom in Indonesia; and (3) to assess the prospects for political policy reform. By integrating the literatures on indigenous religion, freedom of religion and belief, electoral identity politics, and democratic theory, the article contributes to debates about democratic consolidation and minority rights in one of the world's most consequential democratic experiments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Indigenous Religions and the Politics of Recognition

The scholarly literature on indigenous religions in Indonesia converges on a central finding: recognition has been structured by politics rather than by principled religious freedom frameworks. Ma'arif (2017) traces the historical arc of what he terms *pasang surut* (ebb and flow) of recognition, alternating episodes of relative openness and systematic exclusion driven by shifting state ideologies, electoral incentives, and pressures from organized religious majorities. He argues that *agama leluhur* communities have historically been categorized as pre-modern survivals requiring civilizational uplift, rather than as contemporary communities with legitimate claims to constitutional protection.

Maarif's (2023) more recent ethnographic work deepens this analysis by foregrounding the category of relational dignity, which he identifies as the normative core of indigenous cosmologies. In contrast to liberal-individualist conceptions of dignity Maarif (2023) grounded in autonomous personhood, relational dignity posits that worth is inherently embedded in relationships among human beings, and between humans and the non-human world, including ancestors, spirits, and natural entities. This cosmological framework is institutionalized through *adat* (customary law and practice), which functions simultaneously as a religious, ethical, and legal system. Maarif (2023) argues that any adequate account of freedom of religion or belief for indigenous communities must expand its conceptual vocabulary to encompass this relational ontology, rather than forcing indigenous practices into individualist frameworks inherited from Western legal traditions.

This theoretical contribution carries practical implications for the implementation of the 2017 Constitutional Court decision. Sihombing et al. (2021) find that implementation has been hindered not only by administrative confusion, but also by a conceptual mismatch: civil registration officials accustomed to treating religion as a matter of individual doctrinal affiliation struggle to accommodate indigenous cosmologies in which identity, community, and sacred practice are inseparable. Farihah (2020) further documents that some indigenous women have chosen not to update their identity cards, exercising a form of practical autonomy that reflects their own assessment of the costs and benefits of formal recognition within an administrative system that remains imperfectly equipped to honor their relational understanding of religious identity.

The question of religious freedom for indigenous communities is also entangled with rights to land and natural resources. Tuhri (2020) demonstrates, through a case study of the *Orang Rimba* in Jambi province, that freedom of religion and belief for forest-dwelling indigenous communities is inseparable from their rights to the forest environments in which their spiritual practices are embedded. State recognition of *Kepercayaan* identity on identity cards, while significant, does not by itself address the threats to sacred sites and traditional territories posed by extractive industries and resettlement programs.

2.2 Regulatory Frameworks and Their Limitations

A substantial body of scholarship examines the regulatory environment governing religious pluralism in Indonesia. Bagir et al. (2020) provide the most comprehensive recent assessment of the normative and practical limitations on freedom of religion and

belief, documenting how formal constitutional guarantees are systematically undermined by implementing regulations, administrative discretion, and social pressure. They identify Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 on Blasphemy as the structural linchpin of Indonesia's system of managed religious pluralism, a statute that places the state in the position of adjudicating doctrinal disputes it is institutionally ill-equipped to exercise fairly.

Indrayanti & Saraswati, (2022) extend this analysis by examining the blasphemy law from a human rights perspective, arguing that the criminalization of blasphemy is inherently incompatible with international human rights standards unless it is narrowly confined to incitement to hatred, discrimination, and violence against individuals. They call for a reorientation of the law around the protection of persons rather than the protection of doctrine. Bagir (2014) traces the advocacy strategies that civil society organizations have employed in Indonesia's democratizing context, identifying both the opportunities created by competitive electoral politics and the structural limitations imposed by the continuing influence of conservative religious organizations on regulatory outcomes. The subsequent framework developed Bagir & Arianingtyas (2019) offers a conceptual tool for distinguishing permissible limitations on religious freedom from outright rights violations, enabling a more rigorous evaluation of existing and proposed regulations against human rights standards.

Ichsan M & Prasetyoningsih N (2020) examine the doctrinal and constitutional dimensions of the 2017 Constitutional Court ruling, identifying an interpretive controversy between scholars who read the decision as consistent with the Islamic principle of *hifdzuddin* (protection of religion) and those who argue that it conflicts with the constitutional distinction between *agama* (religion) and *kepercayaan* (belief). Omara & Viri (2021) extend the analysis to the question of organizational rights, finding that even where formal recognition has expanded, local regulations continue to restrict the associational freedoms of indigenous communities.

2.3 Identity Politics, Electoral Mobilization, and Democratic Quality

The literature on identity politics in Indonesia has documented a significant shift in the character of Islamic political mobilization since the mid-2010s. Mietzner (2020) characterizes this shift as authoritarian innovation: electoral competition remains formally open, but incumbents and challengers alike have learned to narrow the effective terms of competition by exploiting religious identity cleavages, producing what he terms executive illiberalism. Hadiz V. R (2020) situates this development within a broader pattern of right-wing Islamic populism in which *ummah* solidarity is mobilized against perceived domestic elites and their foreign connections.

Situmorang et al. (2025) provide the most systematic recent analysis of the mechanisms through which the *ummah* narrative operates as a political instrument. They identify five reinforcing mechanisms, namely dichotomous framing, emotional contagion through digital media, religious authority legitimation, ritual incorporation into political demonstration, and victimization narratives, and analyze their operation across the 212 Movement, the 2019 presidential election, and the 2024 presidential election. Their analysis introduces the concept of sacred emotion as a distinctive category of political affect whose transcendental dimension creates stronger mobilization effects and greater resistance to counter-argument than ordinary political emotions.

Krismono et al. (2025) situate these dynamics within a longer historical perspective, tracing the evolution of Islamic political actors' relationship to democratic institutions from the Reformasi era to the present. They argue that Indonesia's democratic institutions have, on balance, channeled Islamic political energy into competitive rather than anti-systemic forms, but that this achievement depends on maintaining the organizational independence of civil society actors, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, who have historically served as moderating forces. Warburton (2018, 2020) analyzes the polarization dynamic produced by identity-based mobilization, distinguishing it from conventional political polarization by its sacred dimension: when political differences are framed as distinctions between believers and unbelievers, the space for negotiation and compromise contracts sharply.

3. Methodology

This study combines a systematic review methodology, defined by Kitchenham (2004) as a structured process of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing all available evidence pertinent to specified research questions. This approach is appropriate for policy-oriented research in which the evidence base is dispersed across institutional reports, legal documents, and academic scholarship spanning multiple disciplines.

Data sources were selected purposively according to three criteria: methodological rigor, relevance to the research questions, and the credibility of the producing institution or author. Primary sources include the report of doctoral research of the authors and the annual freedom of religion and belief reports published by the SETARA Institute for Democracy and Peace in which the first author has served as principal researcher.

Data analysis followed an inductive qualitative approach, moving iteratively between empirical findings and conceptual frameworks drawn from the literatures on indigenous religion, freedom of religion and belief, identity politics, deliberative democracy, and

minority rights theory. Thematic synthesis was used to identify convergences and tensions across sources, with particular attention to the gap between formal legal provisions and practical implementation, and to the interconnections between electoral politics and the protection of minority religious communities.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Religious Pluralism as the Context of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika

In the Indonesian context, the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is inscribed on the state symbol Garuda Pancasila. The motto derives from the literary work *Kakawin Sutasoma*, composed by Mpu Tantular, the royal poet of the Majapahit kingdom. The relevant verse (canto 139, verse 5) affirms that the righteousness of Buddha and Shiva is singular despite appearing as two different substances, concluding that division does not negate essential unity. The full verse reads: *Rwaneka dhatu winuwus Buddha Wiswa, Binneki rakwa ring apan kena parwanosen, Mangkang jinatwa kalawan Siwatatwa tunggal, Bhinneka tunggal ika tan hana dharma mangrwa*. Its meaning, freely rendered, is that Buddha and Shiva are said to be two different substances, yet how can they be divided, for the truth of both is singular. Rendered in modern Indonesian public discourse, the phrase *Unity in Diversity* captures this affirmation of integration across difference (Sultan Hamengkubuwono, 2007).

Religious pluralism is factually the original context of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. The pluralism of Majapahit society was not merely declarative but institutionally embodied. Ricklefs (2008) situates Mpu Tantular's verse within a polity that encompassed Shaivite Hinduism, Buddhism, numerous sectarian traditions, animist and dynastic local religions, and communities of Muslim traders entering the western archipelago. The Majapahit community was structured around several religious communities: followers of Shiva and Buddhism as the official religions of the kingdom; devotees of Vishnu; indigenous people embracing the spirit of ancestors; and Muslim traders beginning to inhabit the western part of the archipelago. King Hayam Wuruk commissioned temples, including Jago, Jawi, and Panataran, that incorporated iconographic elements from multiple religious traditions, constituting an architecture of inter-religious coexistence embedded in the kingdom's built environment (Hb. Hery Santosa, 2001). This form of integration at the kingdom level was reflected in the collaborative use of religious buildings by two or more religious groups, constituting clear evidence of institutionalized inter-religious tolerance.

When President Sukarno selected *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* as the motto of the new Indonesian state, the choice carried the memory of Majapahit's achievement of political integration across religious difference. As Sultan Hamengkubuwono, (2007).argues, the founding generation extended this meaning to encompass Indonesia's full range of pluralities, ethnic, linguistic, racial, and regional. The constitutional aspiration encoded in the motto is that the state constitutes a common identity that transcends, accommodates, and protects the prior identities of its citizens, rather than replacing them. The ideals of the proclamation state were not intended to become a new identity supplanting old ones; the nation serves as a common identity that protects the religious and ethnic identities formed long before the state was established.

Ma'arif (2017) demonstrates that this founding aspiration has been in tension, from the earliest years of independence, with a politics of religion that hierarchically ordered religious communities and systematically marginalized indigenous traditions. The oscillating pattern of recognition and exclusion he documents reflects the political instrumentalization of religious categorization by successive state administrations, rather than principled application of the pluralist logic of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. The 2017 Constitutional Court decision represents one corrective step within this oscillating history, but not a structural resolution.

4.2 Prominent Issues in the Politics of Religious Freedom

In the Indonesian context, three prominent issues are linked to the politics of religious freedom. The first is regulatory inconsistency with constitutional provisions on freedom of religion and belief. The central weak point in the guarantee of freedom of religion and belief is Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 on Prevention of Misuse and/or Blasphemy (Bagir et al., 2020; Indrayanti & Saraswati, 2022). This law serves as the basis for several implementing regulations that affect religious life, including Joint Ministerial Decree No. 9 and No. 8 of 2006 on houses of worship, which has been used to obstruct minority congregations' building permit applications; the 2008 Joint Decree targeting the Ahmadiyya Indonesia organization; and the proliferation of discriminatory local regulations documented by Komnas Perempuan, totaling 421 such regulations issued between 2009 and 2016 alone (Fathiyah Wardah, 2017).

For indigenous believers specifically, the administrative framework prior to 2017 imposed a stark binary: register as a follower of one of the six officially recognized religions, or leave the religion column blank and thereby accept a form of administrative non-personhood. Bagir & Arianingtyas (2019) characterize this binary as a structured rights violation that fails the standards of permissible limitation developed in international human rights law. The 2017 Constitutional Court ruling removed this specific requirement, but Sihombing et al. (2021) document that implementation has varied significantly across local civil registration offices. The regulatory problem also affects institutional support capacity: rather than reinforcing the constitutional mandate, certain government actions have stimulated the occurrence of intolerance and discrimination in religious life (Ismail Hasani & Naipospos, 2021).

The second prominent issue is the strengthening of religious conservatism, which demonstrates the ineffectiveness of state policies in preserving religious pluralism. Religious conservatism here refers to exclusive religious teachings following literal interpretations that cause intolerance toward those with different identities. In several state universities, conservative groups have come to dominate student organizations and shape classroom discourse. As Diani (2018) observes, classrooms that should provide protected spaces for dialogue have in some cases become sites of ideological indoctrination in which religious diversity is presented as a threat rather than a resource.

Empirical evidence confirms this condition. A survey conducted by SETARA Institute in DKI Jakarta and Greater Bandung found that 8.5 percent of secondary students believed that Pancasila should be replaced by Islamic law, and 9.8 percent expressed sympathy for ISIS (Diani, 2018). A national survey by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM), involving 2,181 respondents across all 34 provinces, found that 58.5 percent of Muslim students held doctrinally radical orientations and 34.4 percent were intolerant toward non-Muslims. Among minority Muslim communities perceived as deviant, notably Ahmadis and Shia communities, the intolerance rate climbed to 51.1 percent. Among teachers and lecturers, more than 87 percent supported government prohibition of groups deemed heretical (Diani, 2018). Ardi et al. (2021) further find that social tolerance toward what they term alienated groups, a category that encompasses indigenous believers, is lower in institutional settings characterized by exclusivist religious orientations, indicating that regulatory reform alone is insufficient and that the social conditions shaping the practical meaning of formal rights must also be addressed.

The third and most dynamically consequential issue is the politicization of religious identity and sentiment in electoral politics. This phenomenon intensified dramatically with the 2016 to 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and has had cascading effects on social cohesion, minority rights, and deliberative quality (Halili, 2017b; Situmorang, Samad Umarama, et al., 2025). The Jakarta election crystallized around the blasphemy case against incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), which galvanized the 212 Movement. Situmorang, Umarama, et al. (2025) analyze this mobilization through five reinforcing mechanisms: dichotomous framing that divided society into defenders and enemies of Islam; emotional contagion through social media platforms; legitimation from Islamic authority figures; the incorporation of congregational prayers into political demonstration; and victimization narratives positioning Indonesian Muslims as targets of systematic discrimination. Together, these mechanisms produced what Situmorang, Umarama, et al. (2025) term sacred emotion, a category of political affect whose transcendental dimension intensifies mobilization and strengthens resistance to counter-argument, creating political conditions particularly hostile to minority communities.

The politicization of SARA introduced a pattern potentially destructive to democracy in the form of subordination of law under political pressure. In the context of the Jakarta election, mass mobilization in the name of religion to apply pressure on legal processes degraded the role of law in political contestation (Halili, 2017b). The 2019 presidential election institutionalized the ummah narrative within formal electoral competition, and by the 2024 election its deployment had evolved further through digital infrastructure, including influencer campaigns, micro-targeting, and data analytics (Purnomo A, 2024; Situmorang, Samad Umarama, et al., 2025). Data from the SETARA Institute reveal a significant increase in intolerance and discrimination against minority religious groups between 2016 and 2024, a period that correlates precisely with the intensification of identity-based electoral mobilization.

4.3 Prospects for Political Policy on Religious Pluralism

The prospect of political policy on religious pluralism can be canalized into three interconnected agendas. The first is the formulation of national regulations that are in line with the basic norms of the 1945 Constitution. Indonesia urgently requires a comprehensive agenda of national regulatory reform. The President must lead regulatory reforms that contradict constitutional provisions, within the scope of authority as head of state and government. Specific priorities include the revision of Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 on Blasphemy and Article 156a of the Criminal Code, which have been deployed by vigilante groups to suppress critical and progressive voices under the pretext of blasphemy. The revision and deletion of ministerial regulations, specifically Joint Regulation No. 9 and No. 8 of 2006 on establishment of houses of worship and the 2008 Joint Decree on Ahmadiyah, are equally urgent given their documented role as triggers of discrimination and intolerance (Hendardi, 2018).

The second agenda is the abolition of discriminatory regulations at the local level. It is generally recognized that one of the factors driving the high number of violations of freedom of religion and belief in Indonesia is the failure of the central government to take concrete measures to overturn discriminatory local regulations lacking a diversity perspective. According to the National Commission on Violence against Women (Komnas Perempuan), from 2009 to 2016, 421 discriminatory policies were issued by local governments, including mandatory headscarves for women, night bans, and restrictions against religious minority groups including Shia, Ahmadiyah, and others (Fathiyah Wardah, 2017). While the government has claimed the cancellation of local regulations that impede investment, the annulment of regulations containing discrimination against religious minority groups has been negligibly minimal (Halili, 2017b). The political future of religious pluralism is partly determined by the ability of the central government to discipline local regulations that contradict constitutional provisions.

The third agenda is the formulation of a national rule that explicitly prohibits the politicization of SARA sentiment in electoral politics. Religious pluralism is partly determined by how seriously policy acts to prevent this politicization, since the instrumentalization of SARA will pit communities against each other through primordial sentiment and disrupt the harmony of interreligious and interfaith relations. The existing Law on General Election and Election of Regional Head contains provisions prohibiting SARA-nuanced campaigning, and relevant state institutions have committed to enforcing a campaign environment free from SARA politicization. However, as the evidence from the 2017, 2019, and 2024 elections demonstrates, the enforcement of these provisions requires significant strengthening, including regulatory adaptation to digital environments and sustained investment in civic education programs of the kind documented by (Firdaus et al., 2020; Iwamony, 2020).

5. Discussion

The findings yield three overarching observations about the politics of religious pluralism in Indonesia, each with theoretical and practical implications grounded in the literature reviewed above.

The gap between formal recognition and substantive equality is a structural feature of the Indonesian political order rather than a transitional imperfection. The 2017 Constitutional Court decision extended important formal recognition to indigenous believers, but the implementation deficit documented by Sihombing et al. (2021), the administrative choices studied by Farihah (2020), and the attitudinal patterns examined Ardi et al. (2021) collectively demonstrate that legal recognition operates within social and political contexts that profoundly shape its practical meaning. Sihombing et al. (2021) show that implementation has been hindered not only by administrative confusion but by a deeper conceptual mismatch: civil registration officials accustomed to treating religion as individual doctrinal affiliation struggle to accommodate indigenous cosmologies in which identity, community, and sacred practice are inseparable. This mismatch is precisely what Maarif (2023) illuminates through the concept of relational dignity. In contrast to liberal-individualist conceptions of rights grounded in autonomous personhood, relational dignity posits that worth is inherently embedded in relationships among human beings and between humans and the non-human world, including ancestors, spirits, and natural entities. Maarif (2023) argues that any adequate account of freedom of religion or belief for indigenous communities must therefore expand its conceptual vocabulary to encompass this relational ontology, rather than forcing indigenous practices into individualist frameworks inherited from Western legal traditions. Farihah (2020) finding that some indigenous women have strategically chosen not to update their identity cards further demonstrates the gap between the legal text and lived experience, as the affected communities navigate an administrative system imperfectly equipped to honor their understanding of religious identity. The rights deficit extends beyond administrative classification. Tuhri (2020) case study of the Orang Rimba in Jambi reveals that freedom of religion and belief for forest-dwelling indigenous communities is inseparable from rights to the territories in which their spiritual practices are embedded; identity-card reform does not shield sacred sites from extractive industries or resettlement programs. Omara & Viri (2021) similarly demonstrate that even where formal recognition has expanded, local regulations continue to restrict the associational freedoms of indigenous communities, illustrating the layered nature of the exclusion that the 2017 ruling alone cannot dissolve. At the structural level, the blasphemy law architecture examined by Bagir et al., (2020) continues to function as the linchpin of a system of managed religious pluralism that places the state in the position of adjudicating doctrinal disputes, with predictably unequal outcomes for minority and indigenous communities. (Indrayanti & Saraswati, 2022) deepen this critique by arguing that the criminalization of blasphemy is inherently incompatible with international human rights standards unless narrowly confined to incitement against persons rather than protection of doctrine. Ichsan M & Prasetyoningsih N (2020) further show that the 2017 ruling remains contested at the interpretive level, with some Islamic legal scholars arguing that recognizing kepercayaan on identity cards conflicts with the principle of *hifdzuddin* (protection of religion), a doctrinal dispute that generates ongoing uncertainty in administrative implementation. Collectively, these findings confirm Bagir (2014) argument that religious freedom advocacy in Indonesia must engage not only with formal legal instruments, but also with the political economies, social structures, and interpretive contests within which those instruments operate.

The relationship between electoral politics and religious pluralism is neither uniformly negative nor uniformly positive, but its overall trajectory has been toward the progressive narrowing of political space for minority communities. Mietzner's (2020) framework of authoritarian innovation provides an important analytical lens: while competitive elections formally continue, the systematic exploitation of religious identity cleavages has progressively narrowed the substantive terms of democratic competition, producing what he terms executive illiberalism. Hadiz V. R (2020) situates this narrowing within a broader pattern of right-wing Islamic populism in which the mobilization of ummah solidarity against perceived domestic elites forecloses the pluralist political space that minority communities depend upon. Warburton's analysis of sacred polarization sharpens this point: when political differences are framed as distinctions between believers and unbelievers, the negotiating space that pluralist democracy requires contracts sharply, and communities positioned as other than Islamic become politically unintelligible as full citizens. Situmorang et al. (2025) distinguish inclusive from exclusive identity mobilization and provide the most systematic analysis of the mechanisms through which the ummah narrative has evolved as a political instrument across the 212 Movement, the 2019 presidential election, and the 2024 electoral contest namely dichotomous framing, emotional contagion through digital media, religious authority

legitimation, ritual incorporation into political demonstration, and victimization narratives. The concept of sacred emotion they introduce is particularly useful for explaining the resilience of this form of mobilization: because it invests political claims with transcendental significance, it produces stronger mobilization effects and greater resistance to counter-argument than ordinary political emotions. The evolution from confrontational grassroots mobilization in 2016-2017, through institutionalization in 2019, to technologically sophisticated digital integration by 2024, indicates that the ummah narrative has become an embedded feature of Indonesian political communication rather than a transient episode. Against this trajectory, Krismono et al. (2025) offer a more historically grounded perspective: Indonesia's democratic institutions have, on balance, channeled Islamic political energy into competitive rather than anti-systemic forms, an achievement they attribute to the organizational independence and moderating capacity of civil society actors including Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Hefner (2020) concept of covenantal pluralism which locates the possibility of pluralist politics in cross-communal agreements grounded in shared civic commitments rather than doctrinal consensus suggests that this moderating capacity represents a genuine institutional resource that must be actively sustained if it is to function effectively against the centrifugal pressures of identity-based electoral mobilization.

Religious pluralism governance must be understood as a multi-level challenge requiring coordinated responses at national, sub-national, and civil society levels, a conclusion that follows from the full architecture of the literature reviewed in this article. The normative framework developed by Bagir & Arianingtyas (2019) for distinguishing permissible limitations on religious freedom from outright rights violations provides an indispensable analytical tool, but its operationalization requires sustained political will across all levels of government and sufficient organizational capacity in civil society to monitor and contest violations. Ma'arif (2017) historical account of the oscillating politics of recognition for agama leluhur communities in which episodes of relative openness alternate with systematic exclusion driven by shifting state ideologies and electoral incentives serves as an important reminder that the present moment of partial reform remains reversible; structural solutions rather than episodic victories are what the historical record demands. Ardi et al. (2021) reinforce this point by showing that social tolerance toward indigenous communities is systematically lower in institutional settings characterized by exclusivist religious orientations, indicating that legal reform without corresponding change in social conditions and educational culture will remain incomplete. Situmorang, Umarama, et al. (2025) standard of contextual deliberation which recognizes the legitimate place of religiously motivated reasoning within democratic discourse while insisting on its openness to evidence and counter-argument offers a realistic normative anchor for policy design in Indonesia's high-religiosity political environment. This standard resonates with Hefner (2011) earlier argument for civil Islam, grounded in the demonstrated capacity of Muslim democratic actors to uphold civic norms alongside their religious commitments. The documented contribution of civic education programs to the formation of tolerance orientations (Firdaus et al., 2020; Iwamony, 2020) points toward one institutional mechanism through which these standards can be reproduced across generations. Taken together, the literature reviewed in this article converges on a single overarching conclusion: the persistent disjunction between constitutional aspiration and political reality in Indonesia's governance of religious pluralism is not the product of any single law, actor, or event, but of an accumulated architecture of formal and informal practices that together privilege majoritarian religious identities at the expense of constitutional equality. Dismantling this architecture requires, as the literature consistently implies, a combination of legal reform, institutional will, civil society vigilance, and sustained democratic deliberation anchored in the foundational pluralist commitment of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*.

6. Conclusion

Religious pluralism in Indonesia is simultaneously a natural fact rooted in the historical diversity of the archipelago, a constitutional commitment encoded in *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, and a political achievement that requires continuous renewal through democratic institutions and civil society practice. This article has traced the disjunction between these dimensions, specifically the persistent gap between the foundational pluralist aspiration and its contested realization in regulatory frameworks, institutional practices, and electoral competition.

Three conclusions follow from the analysis. First, the formal legal recognition of indigenous believers following the 2017 Constitutional Court decision represents genuine progress, yet it remains substantively incomplete. Formal recognition addresses the most visible layer of exclusion without resolving the deeper conceptual mismatch between indigenous relational cosmologies and the individualist premises of Indonesian administrative law, nor the material conditions of sacred site access and territorial rights upon which the practice of indigenous belief depends. The work of translating legal recognition into substantive equality has barely begun.

Second, the politicization of religious identity in electoral competition poses a structural challenge to democratic quality and minority protection that has deepened across successive electoral cycles. The normalization of sacred-emotion-based mobilization through increasingly sophisticated digital infrastructure has created conditions persistently hostile to minority communities, including indigenous believers, and has degraded the deliberative quality of Indonesian democratic discourse. Effective responses require legal reform, digital platform governance, civic education, and the sustained organizational capacity of moderating civil society actors acting in concert.

Third, the prospects for durable religious pluralism rest on political will, understood as the sustained commitment of government at all levels, electoral institutions, and civil society organizations to act consistently with the constitutional framework of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. The three reform agendas identified in this article, namely national regulatory alignment with the 1945 Constitution, elimination of discriminatory local regulations, and enforceable prohibition of SARA politicization in elections, are structurally interconnected. Each is a necessary condition for the others to produce durable results. Indonesia's historical experience demonstrates that pluralism is not a passive inheritance but an active political accomplishment, one that must be defended, renewed, and institutionally anchored in every generation.

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