

# Disintegration from Within and Open Indonesian Identity<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article analyzes various primordialistic conflicts coupled with ethnic and religious sentiments that occurred in the post-New Order Indonesia. It uses secondary data collected from various sources of literature. The analysis uses a cultural study approach that specifically focuses on the theory of essentialism and anti-essentialism concerning ethnicity and identity. Essentialism understands ethnicity and identity as a construct anchoring on a fixed and timeless value, while anti-essentialism understands it as a discursive in nature. By discussing the essentialist vis-à-vis anti-essentialist view in constructing state–religion relations in present day Indonesia, this article tries to reveal the underlying construct of Indonesian identity behind the tensions and conflicts between different ethnic and religious groups. It aims to offer an open construction of Indonesian identity as a strategy to neutralize the tendency of national disintegration from within.

Keywords: anti-essentialism, essentialism, ethnicity, identity, intolerance.

## Introduction

Since the end of the New Order's authoritarian regime that controlled the country for more than 30 years, Indonesia has entered a transitional democratic stage, which is known as the reformation era. If previously the state's control over the voice of civil society was quite strong, in this era, the government's political control was so loose and, therefore, opened up space for civil society to highlight their existence and articulate their opinions. However, the loosening of the socio-political system also opened up a possibility of ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural tensions and clashes. They indicated a process of internal

disintegration which might threaten the existence of Indonesia as a unitary state, if we do not pay a serious attention.

According to Mynard, several post-Cold War battles around the globe revealed that a third pattern of violent has emerged. This form of violence involved not only political dimensions but the full spectrum of societal interaction. Rooted in individual identification with groups, these armed conflicts can be called identity conflicts (Mynard, 1999: 33-34). What Mynard has described also took place in Indonesia. In media, we could easily see how various political forces competed for power through both formal and informal channels. They often mobilize identity related issues which

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cause the strengthening of identity politics between ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. In turn, the strengthening of identity politics has sometimes led to the occurrence of communal violences.

For almost two decades after the end of Soeharto's administration, the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian politics continue to be colored by various upheavals that threatened to disintegrate the nation, including interethnic conflicts in Ambon (Maluku) in 1999, Poso (Central Sulawesi) in 2000, violent conflict between the Dayak and Madurese in Sanggau-Ledau and Sampit (West and Central Kalimantan) in 2000, and several other incidents in many regions. According to Triyono (2001), conflict in Ambon was rooted in the local structures that have been shaped by social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics—it was already a latent conflict long before the violence erupted in January 1999. The ethnic card was also played against the migrant community from South Sulawesi, in particular the Bugis, Buton, and Makasar people which were derogatorily referred to as 'bahaya BBM'—the danger of BBM, with BBM stands for Bugis, Buton, Makasar (Bubandt, 2001:247). Heidhues (2001) found<sup>2</sup> (Berita Satu, 10/2 /2011), and later in Temanggung three churches were burned and damaged (Kompas.com 8/2/2011). The political divide of the 2014 Presidential Election (*Pemilihan Presiden/Pilpres*) and 2017 Jakarta Governor Election was also coupled by intense religious and racial insinuations. In the 2014 Presidential Election, Joko Widodo was pigeonholed as a

that conflict in West Kalimantan has been caused by a struggle over economic resources. By tracing the history of social mobility since Indonesian Independence, Heidhues (2001:143-46) pointed out that the occurrence of ethnic conflict leading to violence is caused by several factors, such as transmigration policies, limited economic resources, and cultural differences between Dayak and Madura.

Such primordialistic conflicts in the last twenty years have saturated Indonesian politics, particularly after the enactment of regional autonomy in 2001. Ethnic and interreligious conflicts frequently appear in the dynamics of local politics, especially at political events of local elections (*Pemilihan Kepala Daerah/Pilkada*). Essentialistic sentiment of 'native son' (*putra daerah*) vis-à-vis newcomers have been viciously exploited by the local elite in their competition for power.

While ethnic-based conflicts began to recede in the last ten years, religious related conflicts continue to grow and even intensified. In 2011 a mass attack occurred in Cikeusik, Pandegelang, Banten, killed three Ahmadis

Chinese descent and Christian to show that he was "less Moslem" compared to the other candidate, Prabowo Subianto. In the 2017 Jakarta Governor Election, the attacks on one of the candidates, Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (popularly known as Ahok), were openly racist. Ahok has been politically stigmatized as 'aseng' (foreigner) and constantly attacked by racialist discourses. At the end, Ahok was

<sup>2</sup>Ahamadis is the disciples of a sect in Islam who believe that there is another prophet after Prophet Muhammad, called Ahmad; although they argue that this prophet is not at the same level with Prophet Muhammad because he did not bring new thoughts with him and his task was to assert what Prophet Muhammad had taught.

accused of harassing and insulting Islam, and later convicted into two years imprisonment. The ruthless political contestation of the 2017 Jakarta Governor Election was a concrete example of the prevalent identity politics.

Conflicts exploiting religious differences continue to occur in social and cultural life. In 2018, a suicide bombing killed two people at the Santa Maria Church, Surabaya (Kompas.com, 13/05/2018). Another attack took place during the sea alms ceremony (*sedekah laut*) on the coast of New Bantul, Yogyakarta, by mob riding motorbikes. The mob injured some residents and organizers who were making preparation for the event and caused them to be traumatized (Kompas.com, 15/10/2018). This strong tendency towards identity politics has been sustained up to the time of the 2019 Presidential Election, and even intensified by the widely use of social media. The political competition between Joko Widodo–Ma'ruf Amin and Prabowo Subianto–Sandiaga Uno was followed by a sharp divide between their supporters in social media.

Even though those conflicts have not led to the collapse of Indonesia as a unitary state, the occurrence is still possible. In this article, I will analyze the internal disintegration process using constructivistic and critical perspectives. Some key concepts, particularly ethnicity and identity politics, will be employed to understand the identity conflicts in Indonesia.

### **Identity, Essentialism, and Anti-Essentialism**

There are various theories that explain identity and ethnicity, ranging from

essentialistic and anti-essentialistic views to constructivist and critical perspectives. At the beginning, the Western search for identity stood on the premise that there is such a 'thing' to be found—that identity exists as a universal and timeless core of the self. It means that every person has an 'essence' which we call identity. It also means that there would be affixed essence of femininity, masculinity, Asians, teenagers, and all other social categories. Such essentialism believes that the description of ourselves reflect an essential underlying identity (Barker, 2003:221). In an essentialistic view, ethnicity and identity are natural and permanent, and therefore ethnicity is often identified with physical characteristics. For essentialists, ethnicity is a cultural concept which centered on the sharing of norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices. The formation of an ethnic groups relies on shared cultural signifiers which have developed under specific historical, social, and political contexts and partly encouraged a sense of belonging based on a common mythological ancestry (Barker, 2003:250). Ethnic groups in Indonesia mostly defined themselves based on this point of view.

In this perspective, countries have been broadly and historically defined in term of territoriality that encompasses an area they occupy and resources and populations they control. Therefore, strict boundaries need to be established between countries to define them. It means that a country must also reasonably show a specific identity as a nation which differ them from others; hence, the process of politicization of group identity and the emergence of ethnic problems as an effort of ethnic groups to defend themselves



(Barker, 2000:166). Indonesia faced this ethnic issue problem in 1950s when Daud Beureuh in Aceh and Kahar Muzakar in South Sulawesi fought for separation from Indonesia using ethnic and religious justifications.

On the contrary, others argued that identity is cultural ‘all the way down,’ specific to particular time and place; therefore, forms of identity are constantly changing. This idea of identities’ plasticity has been underpinned by arguments which are referred to as anti-essentialism. For anti-essentialism, identities are discursively constructed—it is not a thing but a description in language. In this context, words are not taken as having referents with essential or universal qualities. That is to say that language ‘makes’ rather than ‘finds’ identity (Barker, 2003:221). It also presupposes that ethnicity is something that has the characteristic of being discursive, historical, and contextual. There is nothing fixed, including ethnicity. For that reason, a culturalist conception of ethnicity is also an attempt to escape racial implications which is inherent in historically forged concept of race (Barker, 2003:250)..

One of identity theories that are in line with anti-essentialist assumptions was put forward by Anthony Giddens who suggested the self-identity as a project. In his view, identity story is an attempt to answer these critical questions: ‘What to do? How to act? Who to be?’ It is individual attempts to construct a coherent identity narrative by which the self could form a trajectory of development from the past to anticipate the future (Giddens in Barker, 2003:221). It means that self-identity is not a ready-made,

but a dynamic process. Such an assumption is also used by Giddens in conceptualizing social identities, as follows:

*Social identities ... are associated with normative rights, obligations and sanctions which, within specific collectives, form roles. The use of standardized markers, especially to do with the bodily attributes of age and gender, is fundamental in all societies, notwithstanding large cross-cultural variations which can be noted.* (Giddens, 1984: 282)

Meanwhile, Stuart Hall (in Barker, 2000:168) in his article entitled ‘The Question of Cultural Identity,’ identified three different ways of conceptualizing identity, namely (a) the subject of enlightenment; (b) the subject of sociology; and (c) the subject of postmodernism. In the sociological perspective, as a sociological symptom, identity is not a self-generating or internal situation about self, but entirely a culture because it is formed through a process of acculturation. As the subject of sociology, identity is not formed automatically through processes that occur within one self, but formed in relation to others. In the process of interaction, values, meanings, and symbols are internalized. The process of interaction with others first occurs in family, including the learning of ways to enter social life. The basic assumption of the subject of sociology is that the subject is a social creator where social and individual identities have their differences.

The conception of identity in postmodernism, in principle, corrects the deterministic view that the self does not always remain a separate entity detached from the social environment as the Cartesian view assumes it does, or that the self is formed by the social environment as assumed



by sociological culturalists. According to postmodernism, all subjects should be seen as having self-core (core self) capable of coordinating themselves reflexively into unity. According to Hall (in Barker, 2000:170), self-decentralization or self-postmodernism includes subjects that continue to shift, split, and have multiple identities. A person has not only one, but several identities that are sometimes conflicting with each other. Hall explained it as follows:

*The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continually being shifted about. If we feel that we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative' of the self' about ourselves. (Hall, 1992:277)*

In the enlightenment perspective, a person should be seen as a unique agent of unity, which was described by Hall as follows:

The enlightenment subject was based on conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose 'centre' consisted of an inner core .... The essential centre of the self was a person's identity. (Hall, 1992: 275)

In Hall's opinion (in Barker, 2003:231), rather than an essence of identity that waits to be discovered, there is cultural identity which is continually being produced within the vectors of similarities and differences. Cultural identity is not an essence but a continually shifting position. The points of difference around which

cultural identities could form are multiple and proliferating. They include identifications of class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, nationality, political position, morality, religion, etc., and each of these discursive positions is itself unstable (Barker, 2003:231). A black subject, for example, in Hall's observation (1996), is not generally stable, because it has been constructed historically, culturally, and politically. For Hall, the term ethnicity is an acknowledgment of the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as of knowledge (Hall, 1996:466). Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community' (1983) for Indonesia corresponds closely with this perspective of Hall.

Anti-essentialists argued that ethnic groups are not formed based on primordial ties or specific cultural characteristics, but through discursive practices. Ethnicity is shaped by the way we speak about group identities or by identifying with signs and symbols which constitute ethnicity. In this perspective, ethnic identities are not pre-given cultural differences but a process of boundary formation and maintenance that is not contingent around signifiers in universal conversations of territory and purity, such as metaphors of blood, kinship, and homeland. The concept of ethnicity according to culturalist perspective is not only open and inclusive, but also politically characterized so it is power-related. While the essentialist perspective is often used by the dominant group to establish and maintain power, the anti-essentialist perspective is trying to shake the establishment. In this sense, the critical



anti-essentialist view is useful for strengthening political democratization and building community citizenship (Barker, 2000:166).

As Barker said, understanding of the concept of cultural identity should be closely related to the assumptions that developed in debates between essentialism and anti-essentialism as explained above. This concept of identity, especially after the Cold War, gave rise to the theory of identity politics which is gaining wide attention in cultural studies (Barker, 2000:166). Many studies that use cultural studies as their approach raise the issue of identity politics in democratic transition countries, including Indonesia.

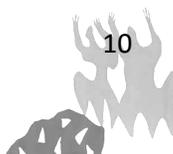
### **Identity Politics and Ethnic-Religious Conflicts in Indonesia**

Agnes Heller took the definition of identity politics as a concept and a political movement with focus on difference as a major political category. After the failure of the grand narratives, the idea of difference gave promise of freedom and freedom of play. But new threats also emerged along the way. Politics of difference becomes a new name for identity politics, namely race thinking, bio-feminism, and ethnic disputes. Various new forms of intolerance and violent practices also materialized (Heller, 1995: ix).

Applying several theories of ethnicity, identity, and identity politics to analyze the issue of disintegration in post-New Order Indonesia, there are some interesting findings. In general, it can be said that various social, political, and cultural conflicts in Indonesians' everyday lives reflect the essentialistic standpoint that strongly

contributes to the disintegration process from within. The essentialistic definition of ethnic group as natural, permanent, and primarily refer to the physical characteristics has led people to construct their identity and the identity of others by exploiting differences in physical traits such as skin color, hair shape, eye color, etc. The principle of 'us' (in-group) versus 'them' (out-group) is frequently applied so that those whose characteristics are not similar to us would be considered as non-members. One of the examples of the manifestation of essentialistic viewpoint is the construction of the identity of Dayaks and Madurese in Sampit and Sanggau during violent conflicts in Kalimantan. The Madurese were constructed as migrants who were economically more successful compared to the Dayaks, but at the same time they were stereotyped and prejudiced as less willing to comply with the regulations whenever they broke the law (try to get away with bribery), disrespecting Dayak customs, rude, and so on. The Madurese themselves view the Dayaks as being lazy, wasting time, primitive, and believe in mystic.

Similarly, the Papuans' identity has been constructed with references to their physical characteristics as having curly hair and black skin, along with stereotypes of being lazy, stupid, and often drunk. The construction of identity involves self, other, and social structures that are relational in nature, therefore in most cases people value themselves based on others' opinion. Accordingly, it is understandable if the Papuans considered themselves as non-Indonesian, because the feeling of being differentiated comes on a regular basis



through social exclusion. The rejection of some Yogyakarta people towards Papua students who want to rent a room in their house was one of the reported cases (BBC News, 14/7/2016). We could find other examples of how people discriminate others based on ethnicity in Indonesia, but it is mostly not as obvious as the Papuans' experiences.

Such process takes place continuously in everyday interactions, so that the feeling that they are disparate continues to settle. The feeling of being excluded or ruled out becomes even stronger when it comes to the issue of economic disparity, injustice, and poverty—simply waiting for a trigger to turn it into a violent resentment and hostility. Ethnic frictions under the New Order regime were quite rare, because the state has been able to effectively control all elements of civil society as well as any potential conflict. But when the New Order collapsed, the situation became out of control and immediately all negative prejudices towards 'the others' gained momentum to materialize into open conflict. Today, although the conflict has been sporadic, incidental, and localized, its potential towards internal disintegration remains strong and detrimental for the unitary state of Indonesia.

This practice of differentiation through the essentialistic concept of ethnicity and identity has led to a situation of socio-political relations which is engulfed by negative stereotypes and prejudices. It emerges as identity politics or politics of difference, particularly in the political moment of elections, including the presidential election. In many regions, local elites exploit ethnic differences to gain mass

support in their efforts to attain power. By exploiting ethnic differences, the elites practically declare that indigenous people (also known as 'native son') are essentially distinct and totally distinguishable from migrants. Under the so-called regional autonomy, political processes at the local level in almost all regions were strongly marked by ethnic sentiments. As a result, the regional configuration of government leaders is always in line with local ethnic stratification. In this case, as the largest ethnic group which spread all over Indonesia, the Javanese are always in a good political position. In Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, NTT, and Papua, many Javanese occupy deputy regents or mayors and deputy governors. We could also find a Javanese as a governor, such as in North Sumatra, while it is almost impossible for non-Javanese to become a governor in provinces in Java.

The ethnicity factor also plays a significant role in the Presidential Election. Almost all presidents of Indonesia were originated from Javanese ethnic group, with the exception of President B. J. Habibie. He comes from non-Javanese ethnic group, but was not elected. Under the system the direct presidential election, it is very unlikely that non-Javanese could become president in Indonesia. This clearly indicates that ethnicity factor is still dominant in the enrollment process of national leadership, and that the essentialistic construction of 'entitled' Javanese leaders has deeply infiltrated the mind of Indonesian citizens through Joyoboyo prophecy of *Ratu Adil* (Fair Queen) (Liputan6.com,19/4/2010).

Such persistent essentialistic understanding of identity has created, and



will continue to create, numerous political and socio-cultural problems in a disintegrative direction. Various facts of conflict in post-New Order era show that whenever a major political change occurs, it would be followed by disintegrative incidents, such as separatist movements in Aceh and Papua, religious conflicts in Ambon (Maluku) and Poso (Central Sulawesi), and ethnic conflicts in Sampit and Sanggau-Ledo (Kalimantan) (Wahyono et al., 2004). The study of Syafuan Rozi, et al. in 2008 which focused on the issue of ethnicity versus Indonesian-ness in Aceh, Riau, Bali, and Papua, has found that factors of injustice, the transition from authoritarian political system to democracy, the feeling as a rich region due to its potentials of natural resources and tourism industry, as well as local elites' manipulation are the main driving forces for ethnic awakening in the region to seeking for independence from Indonesia (Rozi et al., 2019: 25-28). Nazaruddin's study, on the other hand, revealed that Aceh ethnic identification, combined with religious identity and historical collective memory as a 'nation' that was never be colonized, was used by the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) to justify their cause (Nazaruddin, 2011).

Examining various identity conflicts that occurred in Indonesia in the last two decades, it is quite obvious that the essentialistic view of identity that defines an ethnic group based on biological characteristics and primordial ties is still dominating our conception and perception of ethnicity. This essentialistic view might be the underlying reason for local and national elites to exploit ethnicity, and even racial

differences, to gain power and undermine Indonesian national interests. In Indonesian heterogeneous society, pluralism is inevitable, but history also shows that there are forces from within who want to forcing homogeneity under the pretext of unity in order to secure their control over state power. The situation becomes more dangerous with the recently growing problem of religious intolerance which has much higher possibility to disintegrate Indonesia from within.

### **Religious Intolerance**

In discussing religious intolerance, we should focus on two main entities, namely the state and the religion. Both have significant and long-term relationship in shaping the course of history of Indonesian nation. The state and/or religion often appear aggressively as a dominant narrative to control citizens. In Durkheim's terms, state and religion are both social and political structures whose existence are outside the individuals, but have the compelling power to control people's actions both individually and in groups (Ritzer, 2012:132). In Indonesian history, there are mainly two opposite groups that try to dominate the discourse of state and religion relations, namely the integralistic group who believes that religion and state should become one and the secular group who believes it would be better to separate them.

In Indonesian context, the two opposite groups could be measured through their interpretation on the concept of civil society according to the Islamic teachings. There are debates within Islamic intellectual circles in conceptualizing the relation



between two seemingly different concepts: civil society and Madani society. Azyumardi Azra (1999), for example, considered that the equation of the two terms is not a problem. While A. S. Hikam (1999) and Ahmad Baso (1999) argue that the two terms differ from each other. According to Hikam (1999), there is a basic difference between them, especially if Madani society is understood as being illustrated in the early days of Islam. When Prophet Muhammad stayed in Madinah, religion was the only factor that influences people's life and covers all factors of life whether it was political, economic, or even social and cultural. In that context, a Madani society does not recognize the separation of religion from politics or the state. Such separation is only known to Muslim community in modern times, especially after the influence of Western thought, marked by the work of Al Abdur Razq, *al-Idam wa Usul al-Hukm* (Minhaji, 2000: 241). Because of this fundamental difference, some people translate English term of 'civil society' into Indonesian '*masyarakat sipil*' (literally means civil society) and not '*masyarakat madani*' (Madani society) (Baso, 1999: 11).

Such differences in interpreting the concept of 'civil society' and/or 'Madani society' have implications in translating state-religion relations in Indonesia. Those who support the equation of civil society and Madani society tend to agree with the idea of the unification of religion and the state. Conversely, those who hold that civil society is not Madani society tend to agree with the separation between religion and the state.

Wahyono's study (2003) showed that the integration of religion and the state is aspired by some Islamic political parties, i.e.

the Justice and Prosperity Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera/PKS*), the United Development Party (*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan/PPP*), the Moon and Star Party (*Partai Bulan Bintang/PBB*), and the National Mandate Party (*Partai Amanat Nasional/PAN*). These four parties incorporate Islamic principles into their organizational principles. Meanwhile, those who support the separation between religion and the state are the Functional Group Party (*Partai Golkar*), Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan/PDIP*), Indonesian National Party (*Partai Nasional Indonesia/PNI*), and other Pancasila-based political parties (Wahyono, 2003: 53). In many cases, the first group argues for the privileged position of majority religion (Islam) in Indonesia which in turn contributes to the emergence of the problem of religious intolerance; whereas the secular group takes an ambiguous stance by recognizing 'official' religions—Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and since 2000, Confucianism. Either position discriminates the so-called local religions (*Sunda Wiwitan, Kaharingan, Parmalim*, etc.), contributing to intermittent religious intolerances toward those groups.

The term of 'religion' itself represents intolerance, because it has orientation towards purification that renders all spiritual production of local beliefs as superstition. Purification of religious teachings as the main strategy of religious preaching leads to homogenization of local culture entities. The 'puritanization' of religion becomes political and cultural movement that tends to hegemonize and ignore the existence of local



religious and cultural entities—similar to the New Order policy that has been accused of marginalizing all religions. Subsequently, the so-called religion lost its local touch and its basic humanistic characters. Nevertheless, our efforts to build a tolerant Indonesia would critically depend on how far religion could open up to or willing to get in touch with the spirit of locality.

As revealed by Regus (2016), Carson Holloway concluded that ‘political freedom’ could be destroyed by several trends in democracy. That happens whenever democracy exalts individualism, prioritizes materialistic politics, and leaning to the tyranny of majority. According to him, only religion was proven to be successful in overcoming these dangerous tendencies. Theoretically, religion teaches people about personal obligations and social calls to respect oneself and their community while simultaneously respecting the rights of others. Believe in religions’ position in democracy is not merely a ‘myth.’ The history of political thought has never completely forgotten about the key role of religion. In fact, Western political thinkers understand the position of religion from a (political) statehood perspective. Religion is strictly related to political concepts that refer to the protection of the common good (Regus, 2016).

Historically and principally, religion reacts to political systems that dehumanize people—so, since the beginning the basic character of religions is humanism. The prophets of every religion are basically humanist figures who were able to challenge dehumanizing situations of their time. Through reflection and contemplation, the

prophets received divine revelation as their main spiritual foundation in fighting dehumanizing authoritarianism. In other words, the spirit of religion, in its essence, is a divine power that liberates human beings from oppression, discrimination, and exploitation. According to Baum, liberation of labor in creation which was revealed by Jesus Christ and directed by the spirit to its perfection, freed society from all of enemies to human life, including the conditions of oppression (Baum, 1999: 64). If truth is liberating, then the measure of Christian truth is not conformity to conceptual norms which do not change, but to actions that liberate, save, and transform (Baum, 1999:72). Therefore, religion could act as a measure of truth, depending on the extent to which religion has an emancipatory commitment and solidarity as evidenced in the practice of inter-cultural dialogue (including interfaith) and in its struggle to protect the weak. However, as many facts show us, religion in its subsequent development is not always free from dehumanizing actions.

It is interesting to note that at the praxis level, religion shows ambiguity; sometimes it reveals itself as liberating (Baum, 1999), sometimes—and not infrequently—as enslaving. Following this thesis, a hypothetical statement can be expressed, that the more a religion is leaning towards normative-scriptural orientation, the more it shows the character of submission. Conversely, the more a religion opens itself to be understood historically in a scientific perspective, the more it shows the character of openness and receptive. Baum (1999) synthesizes normative theological paradigm which assumes that religion is standardized



and objective, not subjective, with humanistic historical paradigm which accommodates different ways in interpreting reality. With the framework synthesizing the normative and historical dimensions of reality through Karl Mannheim's perspective on the sociology of knowledge, Baum offers his view on emancipation and solidarity. Thus, the discourse of truth is drawn away from the simple question of objectivity versus subjectivity to the questions concerning to what extent the truth reflects the mission of liberation to the oppressed based on emancipatory and solidarity commitments.

A set of norms, whatever their background, whether political, traditional, or religious, must be held accountable: why does a set of norms regulate human actions? Thus, every normative system must open itself to discourse, should not become a closed ideological entity. A closed ideology will always lead its adherents to the pathway of violence and unconsciously encourage dehumanization. What happens is nothing but the subjugation of human consciousness—makes it an object and revokes its authority. At the time ideologies, including religion, take a part in the process of hegemonization.

Traditional measures connect religious conservatism with the acts of religiosity. Religious orthodoxy, according to John Sullivan (1985), can create thought exclusivity that easily extends theological doctrines into political doctrines. The result is intolerant actions conducted by extremely religious people rather than common believers or non-religious ones. The attitude and actions of intolerance by orthodox

religious believers are even more prominent in the practice of social and political life. Theological tension can be a major contributor to the emergence of intolerant attitudes and actions (Abdilah, 2002:164).

By inheriting the New Order's power construction that dominates and subordinates modernization, religion in post-New Order era emerged as a dominating force that puts pressure on local cultures and beliefs. Purification of religious teachings used as the main program of religion implicates the homogenization or uniformity of local cultural entities. 'Puritanization' of religion as a political and cultural movement in the post-New Order era appeared to be a copy of the authoritarian regime's approach in subordinating the existence of local cultures and beliefs. The puritan movement even borrowed the hegemonic instruments from the forces that had repressed them in the past to suppress and marginalize local beliefs.

Expressed differently, the encounter of religious movement with socio-political and cultural constructions created by colonial power and modern nation-state as being represented in the New Order regime resulted in the birth of the puritan movement with double faces. When allowed to act freely, the movement has a tendency to transform itself into a new dominating and hegemonic force aspiring for homogenization. For an instance, pioneered by supporters of modernized Islam, they make new constructions of ethnicity and identity using a biased set of Middle Eastern Islamic thoughts that consider any product of locality as being in need to be purified, straightened, and nurtured, as well as controlled. However, as we seen throughout the history, the process of



will never go without contestation. In this case, the community of 'Islam Abangan' might provide a good example for our discussion. Just take a look into *Serat Centini*, a classical Javanese literature that can be called as a Javanese (*Abangan*) encyclopedia. *Serat Centini* contains a story that figuratively looks like an Islamic story. But if we read it carefully, it would be obvious that the story reflects a Javanese's criticism of the canonical Islam. It contains *gestalt* or the main spirit of Javanese culture which criticizes Islam by re-reading Islam as a tradition of large texts. At first glance, there seems to be a replication of Islamic teachings in there, but the story is full of insinuations that substantively inform that what Islam has offered to the Javanese is considered ordinary because Javanese already has a culture, philosophy, and civilization which is not less interesting for its supporters (Wahyono, 2001).

Interreligious conflicts, as well as the emergence of socio-political movements that exploit religious sentiments to achieve their goals, signify the presence of closed essentialistic construction of Indonesian identity, particularly on the issue of state-religion relations. Referring to Hall's category, this identity construct falls into the category of the subject of positivistic biased Enlightenment. This means that our religious standpoint is still based on an essential cultural assumption that believes in fixedly standard values. Consequently, each religion will claim its own teachings as the most correct one and view the others as wrong and deserve to be demeaned. At the regional level, we can see its manifestation on the formation of a new province that tends to be

in line with religious divide. For an instance, the North Sulawesi Province was divided into Gorontalo Province with a Muslim majority and North Sulawesi Province with a Christian majority. Likewise, the Maluku Province was divided into North Maluku Province with a Muslim majority and Maluku Province with a Christian majority. Thus, as long as the construction of Indonesian identity doesn't comply with constructivist view—or in Hall's terms, understanding identity as a sociological subject or the subject of postmodernism—we will continue to see interreligious tensions in Indonesia. We should go along with Giddens' theory of identity as a project, as something that constantly changes according to space and time, as something that is always in the making. It means that an identity project should be built in the light of our past and present circumstances, together with the trajectory of our hope-for future (Barker, 2000: 167). As an anti-essentialist identity, this identity construct does not submit to essential or universal aspects, since it is a discursive construction that changes in meaning according to space, time, and usage.

On the other hand, there is also an optimism that religion could positively drive the democratic process in Indonesia. It demands a historical understanding of religion to inspire religious institutions and community to recognize local cultures and beliefs and be accommodative to democracy. With a dialectical, inclusive, and substantive understanding, religions and local cultures will be able to be a constructive component of a multicultural society.

As a solution, I offer a culturalist conception of ethnicity that hold ethnicity as



an ‘elegant’ attempt to avoid the inherent racist implications that have been historically formed during the Dutch colonization. In the context of developing a nation-state, as expressed by Barker, a nation should not be identified as a merely political formation but also a system of cultural representations through which a national identity is continuously reproduced through discursive actions (Barker, 2000: 197). Therefore, if anti-essentialistic view of ethnicity could be developed in Indonesian education system through various socio-political institutions such as families, schools, the media, and also political parties, our efforts to build an open Indonesian identity might conceivably be realistic and attainable.

### **Open Indonesian-ness**

Considering the damage brought by the essentialistic view, it is time to change our perspective and working on a new paradigm of ‘Indonesian-ness.’ The thesis offered here is that ‘Indonesia’ should not be taken as a closed concept, but an open concept giving space for each citizen to (re)construct their identity according to their own needs and aspirations. This means that the state should provide equal opportunities for all citizens as active subjects to (re)construct their own Indonesian identity. The ideological foundation of this new notion of identity should not be controlled by certain groups claiming to be the only legitimate defender of Pancasila or protecting themselves under the status of majority religion. Rather, it should refer to an understanding of Indonesian identity as dynamic and discursive. With such understanding, any absolute claim with an essentialist bias—either it is central

government’s bias, Javanese bias, Islamic bias, or other biases—would be rejected. It means that we should, for example, let the people of Papua or Aceh to (re)construct their Indonesian-ness according to their knowledge, conscience, and necessity.

Of course, the (re)construction of Indonesian-ness by each citizen still needs to refer to the concept of plural Indonesia, because empirically Indonesia is an extremely diverse nation. Recognizing and respecting that fact might provide us with an energy source of tolerance in all fields of life. Therefore, the government and society in general needs to be more proactive in collaborating with religious and educational institutions to develop a broad-minded religiosity in the bureaucratic environment, educational institutions, and socio-political institutions in general—that is to acquire an understanding of religion from a historical, contextual, and liberating perspective. The government and social-political institutions need to function not only in the dissemination of national values, but also in prioritizing their tasks to deconstruct intolerance and citizens’ essentialistic understanding of Indonesian identity. This is important, because so far the implementation of existing strategic social programs of government and social-political institutions, despite their claim to introduce values of tolerance, (re)produce intolerance instead (Wahyono, 2019: 28).

Jacques Derrida has offered us a concept of deconstruction to subvert logocentric thinking. Derrida targeted logocentrism which he considered to be a source of philosophical congestion and the end of human science. According to him,



logocentrism causes restraints and retentions of writing since Plato (Derrida, 1978:196). He wanted society and the social world in general to be open and free from the domination of logocentrism, so that they can freely reflect themselves (Ritzer, 2012: 1037). One of the main characteristics of logocentric thinking is dichotomic and hierarchical. Dichotomy or binary opposition scheme comprises of a pair of concepts that appear to be opposite to each other. The first concept in this arrangement is considered to be better than its counterpart—hence, the dichotomy is also hierarchical. This logocentric way of thinking, according to Derrida, must be deconstructed or disassembled through inversion and displacement. In our attempt to criticize the speech–writing dichotomy, for example, the hierarchy must be reversed:

‘We must think what it means to claim that “writing” is better than “talking.” This reversal needs to change the way we understand things. We must do this constantly because the hierarchy of the binary opposition always reestablishes itself.’ (Derrida, 1981: 42)

However, overturning the hierarchy is not enough. That doesn’t change everything, because we are still thinking in more or less the same way, only in the opposite direction. Unfortunately, the movement against intolerance so far tends to stop only at the level of inversion, and not follow it by displacement (Zehfuss, 2009: 188). The reversal action is even carried out by the same method as the intolerance supporters do. Therefore, it is the intolerance movement that reproduces intolerance (Wahyono, 2019:29). The criticism of intolerance did the inversion, but remained in the original system of

thought. Thus, the original hierarchy is still possible and can reassert itself.

Following Derrida, to properly deconstruct intolerance, it is necessary to complete the second stage, namely displacement or the removal of the previous system of thought. The exemplary figures who have successfully carried out this deconstruction steps include Nelson Mandela in South Africa and Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) in Indonesia. They were successful because they have left the old ways of thinking, and therefore, breaking up the reproduction of intolerance. A concrete example of successfully deconstructing person is he/she who is equally respecting a veiled person (*hijabi*) and a non-veiled person. By recognizing them both, he/she does not place them in (hierarchical) binary opposition.

## Conclusion

In the political and social dynamics of contemporary Indonesia, the tides are always tinted with various ethnic and religious conflicts. The assumption that the disintegrative situation is always caused by external factors involving the major powers, such as the United State of America and the People’s Republic of China, with their economic interests in Indonesia, is not completely true. There are also internal factors driving the process of disintegration from within. One of them is the dominant essentialistic understanding of the concept of ethnicity and/or identity. Such essentialistic view persists because it has been deliberately (re)produced by political elites, both at the local and national level. Ironically, in post-



New Order Indonesia, such essentialism is being reproduced precisely because our political system is a democratic one. We might say, then, that the process of democratization in Indonesia is going through banality, or even contradictions.

If the essentialistic understanding of identity continues to be dominant at both the elite and the grass root level, the disintegrative potential will remain high, and at a certain point might become explosive. For that reason, it is time to change and develop our constructivist understanding of

identity in order to create an open and inclusive Indonesian identity. I believe, the future of Indonesia will largely be determined by the trade-off between the essentialistic and anti-essentialistic view in translating ethnicity and identity in the Indonesian context. An open Indonesian identity might neutralize the process of disintegration from within, and at the same time, it might also reorient the existing social and political process of democracy into a more substantial manner.

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