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# From Evangelization to Worship Restrictions: The Changing Characteristics of Threat Perception between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

This article is an examination of the sense of mutual threat felt by both Muslims and Christians in Indonesia from the colonial period to the *reformasi* era (following the collapse of the Soeharto regime in 1998), which has provoked tensions and stained the country's motto of Unity in Diversity or *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. Adopting a historical-comparative methodology, it uses threat perception, restriction of worship and concepts of democracy to explain the dynamic relationship between Muslims and Christians, from their initial encounter to the present day. The study finds that Muslims have perceived evangelization in colonial times and Christianization missions under the Soeharto New Order as a threat, while to Christians the Muslim vision of establishing an Islamic state and the rise of radicalism at the end of the New Order have been perceived as a threat. It argues that, in the *reformasi* era, threat perception has continued and intensified into religious intolerance followed by worship restrictions, and shows that political dynamics significantly affect the quality of Indonesian Muslim–Christian relations.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Muslim–Christian relations; threat perception; worship restriction; religious intolerance; Indonesian democracy

## Introduction

Several international political and social leaders have praised Indonesia for its ability successfully to combine democracy, pluralism and religion, notably Islam, and for its tradition of tolerance. For example, Mike Pompeo, the former US Secretary of State under the Trump administration, spoke admiringly of the country on a diplomatic trip to Indonesia in October 2020<sup>1</sup> and the former US President Barack Obama also described Indonesia as ‘an example of democracy, tolerance, and pluralism’ in 2014.<sup>2</sup> The former UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, also saluted the country, which he called ‘a home of a thousand separate ethnic groups living wisely and harmoniously,

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<sup>1</sup>Allard and Lamb, ‘Pompeo Urges Indonesia’.

<sup>2</sup>Teresia, ‘Obama Praises Indonesia’.

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side-by-side resolving all differences of opinion through dialogues', during the sixth Global Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations in 2014.<sup>3</sup> These statements pointed to Indonesia as a pluralistic and democratic country with a Muslim majority population.<sup>4</sup> Indonesians have lived harmoniously for decades with more than 300 ethnic groups and six officially recognized religions,<sup>5</sup> Muslims living peacefully with followers of other faiths.<sup>6</sup>

Azyumardi Azra and Wayne Hudson confirm this, arguing that Muslims in Indonesia are tolerant and moderate. This moderate Muslim community is marked by the presence of the two most prominent Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as well as other Islamic organizations that support modernity and democratic principles, and yet reject the establishment of a religion-based state. Azra and Hudson believe that modern politics based on Western political thought is compatible with Islam in Indonesia, in part because Indonesian Muslims accept and fully embrace the concept of democracy without losing their Islamic identity.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Sumanto Al Qurtuby emphasizes that democratic, tolerant and pluralist Indonesian Muslims have protected Indonesia from the influences of radical groups. As he explains, the notion of plurality continues to be found in Islamic institutions and Muslim groups. Prominent moderate-progressive Muslims and secular-nationalist and moderate Islamic political parties remain important features in Indonesia.<sup>8</sup>

The assessment of the aforementioned international leaders and scholars is authentic, largely because the majority of Indonesians generally believe that religious tolerance is a prerequisite for a peaceful and harmonious life. This tolerance is, therefore, essential for the implementation of the principle of 'unity in diversity', known as *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, and this means that young people from different religious communities do not need to take religious inclinations into account when initiating friendships and associations. Moreover, the existing local wisdom and tradition, known as *gotong royong*, which indicates cooperation between religious communities towards building bridges and multipurpose buildings as well as cleaning up local neighbourhoods, indicates the prevalence of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in the country. The initiation of inter-faith dialogues and gatherings by religious and local leaders is also essential for maintaining religious harmony between different religious communities.<sup>9</sup>

The democratic, tolerant and religious life of the country is not without blemish, however, and this is evident from the challenges experienced in relations between Muslims and Christians from the colonial period up to the present day. Since their

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<sup>3</sup>Ban, 'Remarks'.

<sup>4</sup>Neither Muslim nor Christian communities in Indonesia are homogeneous. Rather, they include many perspectives and variations. Islamic groups are both moderate and hardline, traditionalist and modernist. Christians in Indonesia also vary in their understanding of sacraments in their denominations. Therefore, this article focuses on Islam and Christianity as recognized by the Indonesian government through Law No. 1/PNPS/1965. In particular, in what follows, both Protestants and Catholics will be called Christians.

<sup>5</sup>Under Law No. 1/PNPS/1965, the Indonesian government officially recognizes six religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Later, in November 2017, following a ruling of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Indonesia, the Indonesian government also recognized indigenous beliefs and native religions.

<sup>6</sup>According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics regarding the Indonesian population, in 2010, 207,176,162 or around 87.2% were Muslims; 16,528,523 (6.95%) were Protestants; 6,907,873 (2.9%) were Catholics; 4,012,116 (1.68%) were Hindus; 1,703,254 (0.7%) were Buddhists; 117,091 (0.05%) were Confucians and the rest followed local religions. See <https://sensus.bps.go.id/topik/tabular/sp2010/7/84301/0>.

<sup>7</sup>Azra and Hudson, 'Political Modernity', 5–6.

<sup>8</sup>Al Qurtuby, 'Rise of Islamism'.

<sup>9</sup>Judohusodo, 'Agama-agama dan wawasan kebangsaan'. See also Yusuf, *Konflik bernuansa agama*.

initial encounter, these two communities have faced severe mutual distrust arising from threat perception. Muslims are reported to have accused Christians of imperialist missions while Christians have been worried about Muslim politicians' efforts to establish an Islamic state, with consequent tensions, intolerant behaviour and communal conflicts. This has also disturbed the generally harmonious and peaceful religious coexistence and hindered the achievement of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in Indonesia.

The present research shows that these tensions have increased over the past two decades as a result of religious intolerance and restrictions on worship. The Council of Indonesian Churches or *Persekutuan Gereja-gereja Indonesia* (PGI) and Jakarta Christian Communication Forum (*Forum Komunikasi Kristiani Jakarta*; FKKJ) have reported that more than 680 churches and other Christian institutions have been threatened, destroyed, closed or banned in the *reformasi* era<sup>10</sup> from 1998 to 2020, and the Setara Institute (SI)<sup>11</sup> and Wahid Foundation (WF)<sup>12</sup> have reported similar findings (see below). This means that the perception of threats to places of worship and restrictions on religious freedom and worship has returned, despite the implementation of a more democratic political system.

These issues deserve serious research as cases of restriction of worship and religious intolerance have threatened the harmony of religious life in a plural-democratic country and violated human rights, including freedom of religion and worship. Such cases have become a major concern in Indonesia, especially after the ratification of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights in 2005,<sup>13</sup> which regulates respect for and promotion and protection of human rights, including freedom of religion and worship (Article 18). Ratifying countries, including Indonesia, are required to provide reports regarding the implementation of freedom of worship. According to reports by the US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, restrictions on worship and religious intolerance have become significant problems in many countries other than Indonesia. In India, for example, in 2000–2015, there were 1,458 acts of intolerance and destruction of Muslim and Christian places of worship by Hindu radical groups, or an average of 97 cases a year.<sup>14</sup> In Pakistan, religious intolerance and restriction of worship were mostly perpetrated by radical Muslims toward Christians and Ahmadis, with 346 incidents in 2000–2015, or an average of 5.2 incidents a year.<sup>15</sup>

The United Nations (UN) Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion and Worship, Ahmed Shaheed, reported that an increase in Islamophobia over the past two decades has endangered Muslims' religious freedom in many countries.<sup>16</sup> In Switzerland, for example, at the end of 2009, the largest party in the Swiss parliament conducted a

<sup>10</sup>Suharto's fall from the presidency in 1998 marked the end of the New Order and was followed by the birth of the *reformasi* era. Student pressure for Soeharto to step down from the leadership occurred as a result of the crisis in economic, political, security, and trust issues at that time. The *reformasi* era started right after President Suharto resigned on 21 May 1998, and he was replaced by his vice president, B.J. Habibie. According to the MPR RI Decree No. X/MPR/1998, this reform aims to bring about renewal in all fields of national development, especially in the economic, political, legal, religious and social cultures.

<sup>11</sup>Setara Institute, *Intoleransi semasa pandemic*; *ibid.*, *Kebebasan beragama*; *ibid.*, *Melawan intoleransi*; *ibid.*, 'Ringkasan eksekutif'; *ibid.*, *Supremasi intoleransi*; *ibid.*, 'Politik harapan'.

<sup>12</sup>Wahid Foundation, 'Ringkasan eksekutif'.

<sup>13</sup>The Indonesian government ratified the International Convention of Civil and Political Rights into positive law in Indonesia through Law No. 12 of 2015, which was promulgated on 28 October 2015.

<sup>14</sup>US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Report on International Religious Freedom in India.

<sup>15</sup>*ibid.*, Report on International Religious Freedom in Pakistan.

<sup>16</sup>Shaheed, 'Countering Islamophobia'.

referendum on banning the construction of minarets. The government opposed the ban as it would damage the country's image, and especially the views of Muslims towards Switzerland. However, nearly 60% of voters and 22 of Switzerland's 26 cantons supported the ban.<sup>17</sup> In France in 2004, the government passed a law banning religious symbols in public schools and, in 2010, a law outlawed the use of face coverings, which Muslim students often wear. Both of these laws were championed by leftists in the French parliament and received broad support from the public during the parliamentary vote.<sup>18</sup>

The present research is, therefore, an attempt to shed light on cases of restriction of worship during the Indonesian *reformasi* era as a factor in the tension that characterizes Indonesian Muslim–Christian relations. It begins with an introduction and an explanation of methods and conceptual frameworks. This is followed by a brief historical overview of previous studies to show the dynamics of relations between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia as well as the causes of the challenges associated with the change to a more democratic political system.

## Methodology

Relations between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia have, over time, experienced mutual threat perception since their initial encounter in the colonial period. The challenges have expanded and become more severe when it comes to the question of worship restrictions and religious intolerance in the *reformasi* era, primarily as a result of changes in the country's political system, which encourages decentralization and the tyranny of the majority through various platforms such as the regulations designed to moderate the construction of places of worship. This leads to the application of historical-comparative (H–C) research to understand Muslim–Christian relations from the colonial period to the *reformasi* era.

This H–C method is appropriate for comparing specific social systems in order to differentiate shared and unique values and to treat what is studied as part of the flow of history situated in a cultural context.<sup>19</sup> It also has the ability to generate new concepts and broaden perspectives by examining historical events.<sup>20</sup> The H–C methodology is, therefore, used here to elaborate both the primary and secondary data on Muslim–Christian relations in Indonesia from the colonial period to the *reformasi* era. Historical evidence, such as the writings of specialist historians, religious leaders and researchers with several years of studying primary sources, will be analysed and used as secondary sources. The current situation is determined using in-depth interviews with religious leaders.

In this research, the authors use secondary data obtained from books and historical records written by actors in the past or observers and scholars who have understood the tensions between Indonesian Muslims and Christians. The historical records are used to illustrate what happened in the past and as a basis for analysis to relate to and compare with the current situation. Meanwhile, primary data was obtained through interviews and limited discussions with religious leaders and those involved in

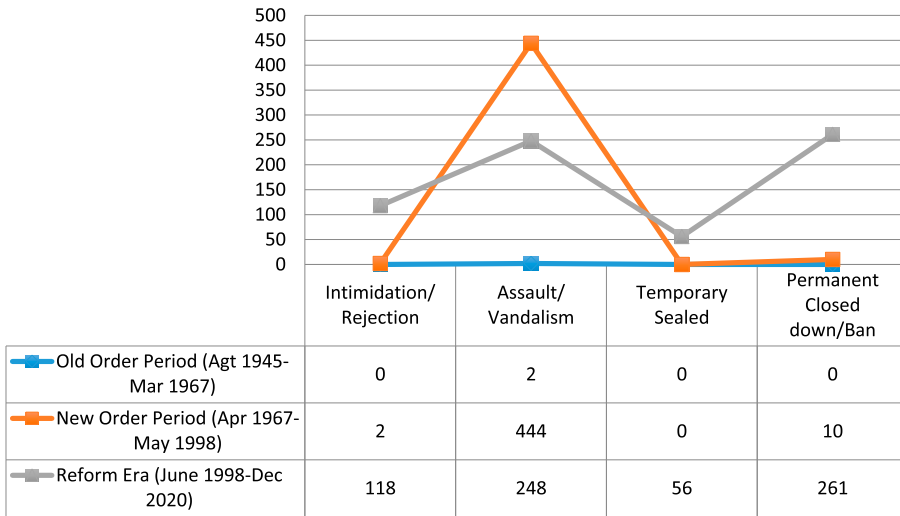
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<sup>17</sup>Gallup, 'Islamophobia'.

<sup>18</sup>US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Report on International Religious Freedom in France; Peace, 'Islamophobia and the Left'.

<sup>19</sup>Neuman, *Social Research Methods*, 382–4.

<sup>20</sup>Blaikie, *Designing Social Research*, 202–3.



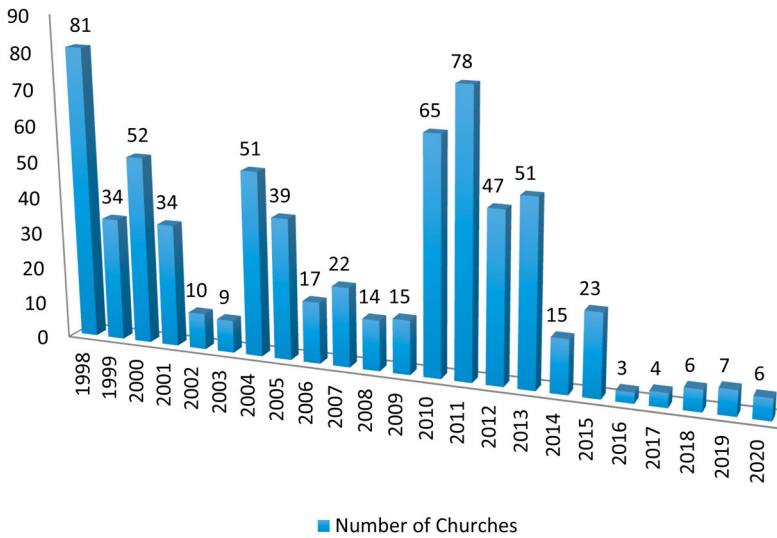
**Figure 1.** Types and numbers of restrictions on worship and acts of religious intolerance under the Old Order, New Order and *reformasi* era (1945–2020). Source: Data obtained from: Setara Institute, *Intoleransi semasa pandemi*; *ibid.*, *Kebebasan beragama*; *ibid.*, *Melawan intoleransi*; *ibid.*, 'Ringkasan eksekutif'; *ibid.*, *Supremasi intoleransi*; *ibid.*, 'Politik harapan'; Wahid Foundation, 'Ringkasan eksekutif'; FKKJ, *Annual reports*; PGI, *Annual reports*.

Muslim–Christian tensions, restrictions on worship and religious intolerance. This primary data is helpful for understanding and interpreting situations. The primary and secondary data are then triangulated to ensure the appropriateness and completeness of the data so that accurate conclusions can be drawn.

A graphic image and table containing a matrix are also used to indicate the deterioration of relations between Muslims and Christians during the *reformasi* era. The matrix provides an overview and compares the situations of Muslims and Christians under different political systems to explain their relationship during a specific period. Figure 1 displays data about the types and numbers of churches that experienced restrictions on worship and religious intolerance during different periods in Indonesian politics, starting from the Old Order (August 1945–March 1967), to the New Order (April 1967–May 1998), and the *reformasi* era (June 1998–December 2020). The authors collected data from various sources, including Reports of Religious Intolerance and Church Restrictions from the FKKJ 1945–2014, PGI 1996–2014, SI 2015–2020 and WF 2010–2018. Figure 1 shows a significant increase in restrictions on worship and religious intolerance under the New Order, but mainly in the *reformasi* era. The increase in the number of worship restrictions and incidents of religious intolerance against churches during the *reformasi* era is described in more detail in Figure 2, where it is mapped annually from 1998 to 2020. This leads to the formulation of a hypothesis that changes in the political system in Indonesia significantly affect Muslim–Christian relations.

### Theoretical framework: Threat perception, restriction of worship and democracy

This article uses threat perception, restriction of worship and democracy as theoretical frameworks to explain Muslim–Christian relations in Indonesia from the initial



**Figure 2.** Numbers of churches experiencing restrictions and acts of religious intolerance in Indonesia 1998–2020. Source: Data obtained from: Setara Institute, *Intoleransi semasa pandemi*; *ibid.*, *Kebebasan beragama*; *ibid.*, *Melawan intoleransi*; *ibid.*, 'Ringkasan eksekutif'; *ibid.*, *Supremasi intoleransi*; *ibid.*, 'Politik harapan'; Wahid Foundation, 'Ringkasan eksekutif'; FKKJ, *Annual reports*; PGI, *Annual reports*.

encounter between the two religions to the present. Regarding threat perception, an Indonesian scholar, Mujiburrahman, uses the term 'feeling threatened' to describe relations between Indonesian Muslims and Christians when he analyses Muslims' perceptions of the Christianization discourse and Christians' perceptions of the Islamic state discourse.<sup>21</sup> Mujiburrahman notes that conversion to Christianity has been felt as a threat to Indonesian Muslims, as has the prospect of an Islamic state to Indonesian Christians.

In social identity and social psychology theories, Muslims' and Christians' feeling threatened or threat perceptions begin with a thesis of an 'in-group' and an 'out-group', resulting from identifying a collective identity based on group membership.<sup>22</sup> Negative out-group characterization is the outcome of perceptions of out-groups as competing for resources and when a group views the out-group as having a history of tense relations.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, following Mujiburrahman's argument, the notion of threat perception is used here to define a situation where a group of people has either the capability or intention to inflict harm on or to threaten other groups.

Regarding threat and what is perceived as a threat, David Rousseau and Rocio Garcia-Retamero classify it into three types: military, economic and cultural.<sup>24</sup> This is to support what Samuel Huntington has argued in 'The Clash of Civilizations?', where he postulates that the current root causes of conflicts in global politics are mainly cultural and civilizational differences.<sup>25</sup> Increasing interactions between people from different cultural and

<sup>21</sup>Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 19–20.

<sup>22</sup>Henri Tajfel, 'Experiments'; Tajfel and Turner, 'Integrative Theory'.

<sup>23</sup>Islam, 'Social Identity Theory', 1782.

<sup>24</sup>Rousseau and Garcia-Retamer, 'Identity, Power, and Threat Perception'.

<sup>25</sup>Huntington, 'Clash of Civilizations?'.

civilizational backgrounds have the ability to stimulate conflicts. Further, the rise of fundamentalist religious groups has been discovered to have increased the differences and exacerbated the conflicts between Western and non-Western values. According to Huntington, conflicts rooted in culture and civilization present more challenges to compromise and resolution than those rooted in politics and economics.<sup>26</sup> The adoption of this concept in this research shows that the threat perception between Indonesian Muslims and Christians is initially due to cultural background differences and this has been observed to have started when Western missionaries brought evangelization projects to the country. The issue becomes political, however, when the political system adopted during independence days in 1945 became more democratic in the late 1990s.

It is important to note that evangelization refers here to Western missionaries preaching the Gospel and spreading Christianity along with their political and economic agenda. This concept was believed by some historians to be an extension of the Crusades in Europe and the Middle East, such that Bertram J.O Schrieke (as noted by Jan Aritonang) perceives it as motivated not only by religion but also by political and economic interests.<sup>27</sup> This was further associated with the ‘gold, glory, gospel’ slogan used by Spain, Portugal, Britain and Holland in their efforts to gain control in the Americas, Africa and Asia, including Indonesia. However, attempts to spread Christianity, particularly in Asia and Africa, clashed with the interests of Muslims, who had benefited from these areas hundreds of years earlier.<sup>28</sup>

Two different periods are associated with the spread of Christianity in Indonesia, namely, the colonial and the New Order periods. This led to the use of two different terms in this study to distinguish these activities: evangelism and Christianization. Evangelism refers to the spread of Christianity by Western missionaries, particularly Catholicism by the Portuguese and Protestantism by the Dutch, to native people who followed local religious beliefs. Christianization refers to the efforts of domestic missionaries to convert residents who practised various religions, including Islam, to Christianity.

Restriction of worship is defined in terms of activities and perpetrators. It is a concept defined by the United States’ International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, Sec. 2.4–2.6 as encompassing several activities, including (1) severely restricting or prohibiting freedom to study, believe, observe and freely practise the religious faith of one’s choice, (2) severe prohibitions against the construction and repair of places of worship, (3) denying others the right to assemble and relegating religious communities to illegal status, (4) expediting prohibitions against the pursuit of education or public office, (5) prohibitions against publishing, distributing or possessing religious literature and materials, (6) severe and violent forms of religious persecution such as detention, torture, beatings, forced marriage, rape, imprisonment, enslavement, mass resettlement and death merely for peaceful belief in, change of or practice of one’s faith, and (7) instigating widespread, systematic and heinous acts under totalitarian governments and in countries with militant and politicized religious majorities.

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 Sec. 2.4 also discusses the perpetrators of these restrictions on worship, which include governments through sponsored and

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>27</sup>Aritonang and Steenbrink, *History of Christianity in Indonesia*, 9.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*; see also Wright, *Gold, Glory, and the Gospel*.



tolerated violations such as state-sponsored slander campaigns, confiscation of property and surveillance by security police, including special divisions of 'religious police'. Article 4 of UN Resolution No. A/RES/51/93 regarding Elimination of all Forms of Religious Intolerance expanded and recognized perpetrators to include governments and other persons or bodies conducting hatred, intolerance, acts of violence, intimidation and coercion, motivated by religious intolerance.

These international legal frameworks and the data collected in this research are used to classify religious intolerance and restriction of worship in Indonesia into four categories: (1) threatening and intimidating behaviour and rejection of church construction by the local community, (2) attacking, destroying and burning of churches by militant groups, (3) temporary closure of churches by security officers at the instigation of the local community and militant groups, and (4) permanent closure of churches and revocation of church permits by the local government.

Religious intolerance, which later developed into restrictions on worship, increased significantly after Indonesia changed to a more democratic political system in 1998. The fall of President Soeharto, which marked the end of the New Order regime, led to a new political system that provided more significant opportunities for the public to be involved in socio-political affairs. This allowed the formation of more political parties and social organizations, as indicated by the increase in the number of the parties from the three that participated in the general elections during the Soeharto era, especially in 1977–1997, to 48 in the 1999 election, 24 in 2004, and 38 in 2009.<sup>29</sup>

The increasing number of political parties is believed to be an indicator of a democratic system, according to J. Brian O'Day,<sup>30</sup> while Jose Mendez interprets the notion of democracy as a responsibility of regimes to bring benefits to societies through decentralization, among other things.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Jorge Dominguez and Anthony Jones argue that democratic governments are required to protect citizens' fundamental rights<sup>32</sup> and this is observed with human rights protection being the main principle of the Indonesian government. Consistency in applying democracy and the protection of human rights is observed to be more prevalent in the *reformasi* era than previously.<sup>33</sup>

It is also important to note that Indonesian political leaders amended the 1945 Constitution or *Undang-undang Dasar* (UUD) six times during the 22 years of the *reformasi* era and human rights principles including right to life, right to work and education, freedom to embrace any recognized religion, and right to worship according to religion and belief have been massively inserted. This is considered necessary in a pluralistic society where the people are grouped by ethnicity, religion and race. However, according to John Stuart Mill as reviewed by Struan Jacobs, the authority of society over individuals is perceived to have the ability to harm the promotion of human rights.<sup>34</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>29</sup>Kompas. 'Partai politik'.

<sup>30</sup>O'Day, 'Democracy Indicators'.

<sup>31</sup>Mendez, 'Toward More Balanced Approaches'.

<sup>32</sup>Dominguez and Jones, 'Building and Sustaining'.

<sup>33</sup>Abdilla Fauzi Achmad notes that Indonesia has undergone developments and several changes in its political system, which he classifies into four periods: (1) the colonial period or the period before Indonesian independence in 1945; (2) the Old Order, divided into three periods: the Revolutionary Period (1945–1949), the Transitional Period (1949–1959) and the Guided Democracy Period (1959–1966); (3) the New Order under the Soeharto administration in 1966–1998 and (4) the *Reformasi* Era from 1998 to the present day (Achmad, *Tata kelola bernegara*).

<sup>34</sup>Jacobs, 'John Stuart Mill'.

Mill's concept of the tyranny of the majority is likely to take shape when the majority becomes the stronger party in society, thereby harnessing greater power, which can be used to inhibit the promotion of human rights and freedom, good governance and social progress.

The democratic mechanism is very often used to justify unlimited majoritarian interests such that majoritarian voices, which are usually known as 51% voices, are normally used as the essential requirement to pass or implement a policy or any action without considering the injustice this may cause minority groups. These policies and actions usually damage the interests of the minority and provide several benefits to the majority with the greater authority.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the last section of this research substantially explains the emergency resulting from majority tyranny in terms of religious intolerance and restriction of worship in Indonesia. The change in the political system, which provides local government with more authority, is believed to have caused this majority tyranny.

### Historical overview of Muslim–Christian relations in Indonesia

This study argues that Muslims and Christians in Indonesia have suffered from mutual threat perception since their first encounter. The perception emerges when the parties each believe that the other possesses the power and capacity to harm their groups and interests. Four situations were discovered to have led to this threat perception: (1) evangelization during the colonial period, (2) vision to establish an Islamic state during independence days, (3) increasing numbers of Christians during the New Order era under President Soeharto, and (4) the emergence of radicalism and terrorism at the end of the Soeharto era.

The threat perception initially emerged at the beginning of the colonial era, which was the country's early period of evangelization. Catholic and Protestant missionaries from Portugal, Germany and Holland were reported to have come to Indonesia in the sixteenth century and met natives who had embraced Islam. The Islamic religion peaked on the islands of Java and Sumatra during this period. Evangelization was difficult since local Muslims called the Christian missionaries and their followers infidels or devils to show their dislike and rejection of the so-called religion of the colonizers.<sup>36</sup> Evangelism succeeded only in North Sumatra, especially on the islands of Nias and Mentawai, which are located separately from Sumatra Island and, in eastern parts of Indonesia such as East Nusa Tenggara, North Sulawesi, Maluku and Papua, where the natives held local beliefs before converting to Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

Alexander Arifianto, Karel Steenbrink and Robbie Goh notably point out the activities of Dutch missionaries, who came with and were supported by Dutch colonialists in Indonesia.<sup>38</sup> They capture the rejection of the new religion by local people as many Muslims on Java and Sumatra described it as the 'religion of colonialists' and its followers as

<sup>35</sup>Kurniawan, 'Tirani mayoritas'.

<sup>36</sup>Wanandi, 'Islam in Indonesia'; Goh, *Christianity in Southeast Asia*; Steenbrink, *Dutch Colonialism*; Arifianto, 'Explaining the Cause'.

<sup>37</sup>Steenbrink, *Dutch Colonialism*; Arifonang, *Sejarah perjumpaan Kristen*; idem, *Berbagai aliran*, 14–21.

<sup>38</sup>Arifianto, 'Explaining the Cause'; Steenbrink, *Dutch Colonialism*; Goh, *Christianity in Southeast Asia*.

'*infidels*'.<sup>39</sup> Arifianto and Goh assert that Christian missionaries were the source of tension between Muslims and Christians during the colonial era. They discuss Muslim-Christian tension by focusing on Indonesian Muslims' rejection of Dutch colonialism and missionaries, but not specifically on the tension between Indonesian Muslims and Indonesian Christians.

The arrival of Dutch colonialists and their religious missions in Indonesia provoked a sense of threat amongst Indonesian Muslims and so created nationalism based on Muslim brotherhood in the country. Solahudin and Jusuf Wanandi explain the Indonesian Islamic movements established in the early twentieth century (Muhammadiyah in 1912, Al Irsyad in 1914, Persis [Persatuan Islam] in 1923, and Nahdlatul Ulama [NU] in 1926) as building Indonesian Muslim solidarity in fighting against colonialism, mainly through education and economic development. They comprehensively explain why and how these Islamic organizations were founded, organized and activated and discuss their activities, which were mainly aimed at empowering Indonesian Muslims against Dutch colonialism, not the Indonesian Christians.<sup>40</sup>

However, a constructive relationship between Indonesian Muslims and Christians started when they shared a sense of 'one nation' and a similar intention to end colonial power.<sup>41</sup> Their efforts peaked in the youth congress of 1926 and 1928, when some Muslim youths from Java, Sumatra, Betawi (Jakarta) and Celebes (Sulawesi), along with Christian youths from North Sumatra, Ambon (Maluku) and Minahasa (North Sulawesi), and some descendants of Chinese migrants, agreed to declare that they were one nation, one motherland and one language, regardless of their ethnicity, race and religious background. The consensus, which was also known as the *Sumpah Pemuda* or Youth Pledge in 1928, strengthened belief in the principle of unity in diversity or *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*.

Political leaders were involved in an exhausting ideological debate slightly before Indonesian independence, in contrast to the constructive relationships between Muslim and Christian youths. Ahmad Syafii Maarif, B.J. Boland, Endang Saifuddin Anshari and Solahudin point to the debate on the foundation of a newborn state.<sup>42</sup> Christian and nationalist leaders were reported to have challenged pious Muslim leaders, mainly from Masyumi, NU, *Partai Syarikat Islam*, and *Persatuan Tarbiyah Islamiyah* (PERTI), who proposed that Islam should be the political foundation of the state. The debate mainly focused on the text of the 'first pillar of Pancasila'<sup>43</sup> in the Jakarta Charter (*Piagam Jakarta*): *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* (Belief in the One Supreme God) and whether: '*dengan kewajiban menjalankan syariat Islam bagi pemeluknya*' (known as the 'seven words' and translated: 'with the obligation to perform Islamic law for His followers') should be added, as they were in the preamble of the 1945 UUD.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Aritonang, *Sejarah perjumpaan Kristen*.

<sup>40</sup>Solahudin, *NII Sampai JII*; Wanandi, 'Islam in Indonesia'.

<sup>41</sup>Sitompul, *Agama-agama dan wawasan kebangsaan*.

<sup>42</sup>Solahudin, *NII Sampai JII*; Maarif, *Studi tentang percaturan dalam Konstituante*; Boland, *Pergumulan Islam di Indonesia*; Anshari, *Piagam Jakarta 22 Juni 1945*.

<sup>43</sup>Pancasila is the ideology and basis of the Indonesian nation-state, which consists of five precepts: (1) belief in the One Supreme God, (2) just and civilized humanity, (3) Indonesian unity, (4) democracy led by solemnity and wisdom in representative deliberations, and (5) social justice for all Indonesian people.

<sup>44</sup>Syarif, 'Spirit piagam Jakarta'. Solahudin, *NII Sampai JII*, 56.

Mohammad Hatta, the first Indonesian vice president, publicly writes in his autobiography that a Japanese naval officer visited him and delivered a message from Kaigun,<sup>45</sup> which had authority in eastern Indonesia and Kalimantan:

*Opsir itu, yang aku lupa namanya, datang sebagai utusan Kaigun untuk memberitahukan sungguh, bahwa wakil-wakil Protestan dan Katolik, yang (tinggal di wilayah yang) dikuasai Kaigun, berkeberatan sangat terhadap bagian kalimat dalam pembukaan Undang-undang Dasar yang berbunyi: Ketuhanan dengan kewajiban menjalankan syariat Islam bagi pemeluk-pemeluknya.*

The officer, whose name I forget, came as an envoy from Kaigun to inform me that the representatives of Protestants and Catholics (who lived in the area) controlled by Kaigun strongly objected to the part of the sentence in the preamble to the Constitution which states: To believe in the One Supreme God with the obligation of performing Islamic law for its followers.<sup>46</sup>

Hatta then persuaded four figures from the Islamic parties, Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, Wahid Hasjim, Kasman Singodimejo and Teuku Muhammad Hasan, to remove the legalistic Islamic elements, and especially the points stipulating that Islam was the official religion of the state and the obligation to apply Islamic law to Muslims.<sup>47</sup> The Islamic parties agreed to the proposal for two reasons. First, the new-born state should be founded as a unitary state in which state matters were separate from religious matters as proposed by the nationalist party and, second, both the Islamic and nationalist parties realized the importance of unity and of avoiding divisions with non-Islamic groups, particularly the Christians, in preparing for national independence.

The debate ended with a historical consensus to abolish the *Piagam Jakarta* and put ‘Belief in One Supreme God’ as the first pillar of Pancasila. Thus, national leaders from diverse religious backgrounds eventually accommodated all recognized religions, respecting the rights of their followers.<sup>48</sup> In the following years, political powers were polarized between Muslims, Nationalists and the Communist Party under President Soekarno. Christian leaders played a minimal role or were even quite outside the political triangle. This became advantageous for Christian groups, as they could focus on religious matters and the development of their disciples.

The movement from the Old Order to the New Order marked President Soeharto’s new political strategy, which has been called a bureaucratic authoritarian regime with military control as its backbone and political stability as its foundational vision to create economic prosperity. This strategy maintained a good relationship between religious communities and initially created a secure and more peaceful situation, despite being considered less democratic. Mujiburrahman, Robert Pringle and Chris Wilson have examined the role of authoritarian government and the dominant power of the Indonesian military (TNI) in maintaining the social and political situation.<sup>49</sup> They record the triumph of Soeharto’s regime in forcing all Indonesians to accept Pancasila as the sole basis of the state and preventing any Islamic hardliners from conducting

<sup>45</sup>The Japanese Imperial Navy, which at that time controlled the Greater East Regional Police covering the islands of Sulawesi, Maluku, West Irian, headquartered in Makassar and the Police on Kalimantan Island headquartered in Banjarmasin. See: <https://museumpolri.org/sejarah/posting/3/masa-pendudukan-jepang>.

<sup>46</sup>Cited by Santika, *Menggal dan menemukan roh Pancasila*, 35.

<sup>47</sup>Syarif, ‘Spirit piagam Jakarta’; Effendy, *Islam dan Negara*.

<sup>48</sup>Solahudin, *Nilai Sampai Jil, 57*, Syarif, ‘Spirit piagam Jakarta’; Sutanto, ‘Pancasila, 230–3.

<sup>49</sup>Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*; Pringle, *Understanding Islam*; Wilson, *Ethno-Religious Violence*.

militant activities by using economic, intelligence and security approaches. In this situation, Muslim–Christian relations were relatively peaceful.

Christian leaders benefitted from this period since the government guaranteed their freedom to preach, which led to a dramatic increase in the number of Christian converts.<sup>50</sup> As noted by Sudarto and Charles E. Fahardian, a significant increase in the number of Protestant and Catholic believers gave rise to tension due to Muslims' critical view of so-called Christianization conducted by Indonesian and foreign missionaries.<sup>51</sup> Kris H. Timotius explains Muslim–Christian tension from various perspectives, concluding that the conflicts are rooted in theology, economics, culture, politics, legal issues and mass media.<sup>52</sup> He postulates that religious conflicts in Indonesia are rooted in the capitalization of religious adherences, competition on behalf of political groups, weak law enforcement, military measures and provocative media. Both Sudarto and Timotius focus on the issue of religious and ethnic conflicts but not on restrictions on worship, which are explained in this article.

It is interesting to note that the number of Christians increased significantly during the Soeharto era, as is evident from the National Census conducted by the Central Statistical Agencies, which showed it rose from 1.7 million in 1933 to 8.74 million in 1971, 17.28 million in 1990, and 23.44 million in 2010. Two reasons have been given for this increase. The first is associated with Soeharto's strategy of destroying communist influence, particularly on Java Island, in the late 1960s to 1970s. The failure of the Indonesian Communist Party's (PKI) *coup d'état* in 1965 led to the issuing of the People's Consultation Assembly issued Decree No. XXV/MPRS/1966 to ban the PKI. Islamic youth groups backed by the Indonesian Army allegedly carried out mass assassinations of approximately a quarter of a million PKI supporters and sympathizers.<sup>53</sup> The accommodation and protection provided by some Catholic and Protestant churches meant that most of the PKI sympathizers and followers in Java who primarily practised *abangan*<sup>54</sup> opted to embrace Protestantism and Catholicism.<sup>55</sup> It was also a response to the government policy that forced Indonesians to identify themselves with a recognized religion.<sup>56</sup>

The second is associated with evangelistic missions conducted by domestic missionaries to convert the native inhabitants of Java, Sumatra and Kalimantan. They were supported by American and Western missionaries, who introduced Pentecostalism and charismatic (Neo-Pentecostal) denominations to Indonesia in the 1970s by building mission stations, Christian schools and hospitals as well as organizing Christian public services in a large field, known as *Kebaktian Kesembuhan dan Kebangunan Rohani* or

<sup>50</sup>Sudarto, *Konflik Islam-Kristen*.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.; Fahardian, *Christianity, Islam, and Nationalism*.

<sup>52</sup>Timotius, *Religious and Ethnic Conflicts*.

<sup>53</sup>Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 24; Daulay, *Agama dan politik*, 116; Sukamto, 'Ketegangan antar kelompok agama', 33.

<sup>54</sup>The term *abangan* refers to Indonesian Muslims who followed traditional Javanese peasant culture. See Geertz, *Religion of Java*.

<sup>55</sup>Regarding the conversion of *abangan* people, there was a difference of opinion between Muslims and Christians. According to the Islamic group, the *abangan* had formally become Muslims but they needed purification from *shirk* or heresy. In contrast, the Christian group saw the *abangan* as having no religion, so they had the right to be offered Christianity; Sukamto, 'Ketegangan antar kelompok agama', 34–5.

<sup>56</sup>Jones, 'Spreading the Gospel'; Sukamto, 'Ketegangan antar kelompok agama'.

healing and revival services.<sup>57</sup> These services were also accompanied by the provision of basic necessities such as food, medicines, clothes, scholarships or tuition fee allowances, financial aid and medical treatment for people in need. Some scholars argue that the aggressiveness of these Christian missionaries was a significant factor in causing tension between Muslims and Christians at the time. Muslims were critical of the Christianization programme being conducted under the guise of providing essential assistance, especially when it came to the conversion of Muslims to Christianity.<sup>58</sup>

The Minister of Religious Affairs, K.H. Muhammad Dachlan, held an interfaith meeting in Jakarta in November 1967 after the mass killing of PKI members and the increase of the number of Christian converts. The representatives of the two religions had very different perspectives and this led to a fierce debate on the spread of religion. For example, Rasjidi, a delegate from the Islamic party, stated: ‘I have just finished reading a book by Dr. [sic] Hendrik Kraemer entitled, *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*. The book clearly shows the plans and efforts of Christians to Christianize the world, especially Indonesia.’<sup>59</sup>

The forum that was intended to resolve Muslim–Christian tensions actually worsened the situation. Hamka, from the Islamic party, alleged that the Christian group benefitted from the forum, saying: ‘The colonizers used to say they came with a sacred mission to Indonesia and now that the colonizers are gone, the task is taken over by the Christian group of our nation, with money and people provided by the West.’<sup>60</sup>

Christian communities started to become afraid at the end of the Soeharto era due to the rise in terrorism and radicalism associated with the plan to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia and inflict violence on churches, as observed in Tasikmalaya in West Java and Situbondo in East Java in the mid-1990s.<sup>61</sup> The emergence of the terrorist group called *Jemaah Islamiyah Indonesia* (JII), which is allegedly affiliated with the international terrorist network al-Qaeda, aggravated relations between Muslims and Christians. The JII initially targeted places of worship, mainly churches and public spaces, and later focused on foreign assets, the Indonesian government and state officials. The group and its offshoots carried out explosions in at least 30 churches in 2000–2020, while hardline groups such as *Aliansi Gerakan Anti Pemurtadan* (Alliance of Anti-Apostate Movements; AGAP) and *Gerakan Islam Reformis* (Islamic Reformerist Movement; GARIS) directed their attacks at Christian institutions.<sup>62</sup> This subsequently exacerbated Muslim–Christian tension in Indonesia as a result of threat perception and, in the ensuing period, religious intolerance and restrictions on worship developed.

The increasing mutual suspicion at the end of Soeharto’s era and the beginning of the *reformasi* era was also accompanied by communal conflicts that were rooted in social, economic and political factors but which took on a religious aspect, as reported in

<sup>57</sup>Mujiburrahman, *Feeling Threatened*, 28–9, Aritonang, *Berbagai Aliran*, 166–70, 194–9; Sukanto, ‘Ketegangan antar kelompok agama’, 36.

<sup>58</sup>Sudarto, *Konflik Islam-Kristen*; Fahardian, *Christianity, Islam, and Nationalism*; Sukanto, ‘Ketegangan antar kelompok agama’.

<sup>59</sup>Sukanto, ‘Ketegangan antar kelompok agama’, 40.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Sudarto, *Konflik Islam-Kristen*; Fahardian, *Christianity, Islam, and Nationalism*; Solahudin, *Nil Sampai JII*; Timotius, *Religious and Ethnic Conflicts*.

<sup>62</sup>FKKJ Reports 1980–2000; see also Solahudin, *Nil Sampai JII*, 189.

Poso and Maluku.<sup>63</sup> Dhurorudin Mashad and Emilia Yustiningrum focus mainly on explaining the causal factors in the conflicts and touch on the relationship between majority and minority groups.<sup>64</sup> They find that, after the Dutch colonial period, which benefitted Christianity, the change in the political system brought advantages to Muslims because they represented a higher proportion of the population. This meant that they were more dominant in the social, economic and political spheres, which triggered conflicts.

The Poso and Maluku conflicts also showed that relations between Muslim and Christian communities in these areas were dominated by mutual threat perception, which grew into mutual suspicion and tensions. In Maluku, Christian leaders saw the process of migration of non-Christians of Bugis, Buton and Makassar ethnicities to Maluku as part of a national project to destroy Maluku because it is a Christian centre in eastern Indonesia.<sup>65</sup> They pointed out that the Christian community had suffered damage to their religious sites, with the FKKJ reporting that Islamic militant groups had attacked 192 churches during the conflicts.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, Muslim leaders argued that the conflict was designed to purge Muslims from Ambon, accusing the Republik Maluku Selatan, a separatist movement associated with Christian militants, which was fighting for the secession of Maluku from Indonesia.<sup>67</sup>

### Religious intolerance and restrictions on worship in the *reformasi* era

The *reformasi* era was substantially marked by the emergence of several social organizations and political parties, including some related to the Islamic religion, when President B.J. Habibie passed Law No. 2/1999 regarding Political Parties.<sup>68</sup> However, Bahtiar Effendy has confirmed that some groups became militant and turned into supporters of radical ideas. For example, in August 2001, the *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defender Front; FPI) strongly called for the re-insertion of the ‘seven words’ in the *Piagam Jakarta*. However, the idea failed as the two most prominent Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, rejected the demand.<sup>69</sup>

It has also emerged that two Islamic political parties, *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (United Development Party) and *Partai Bulan Bintang* (Star Moon Party) had also previously, in 2000, raised the idea of an amendment to include the ‘seven words’ in the Constitution through the People’s Consultative Assembly. This proposal was rejected, however, by six Islamic, national and Christian political parties, including the *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan* (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), *Partai Golkar* (Golkar Party), *Persarikatan Daulatul Ummah* (Daulatul Ummah Association), and *Partai Demokrasi Kasih Bangsa* (Love the Nation Democratic Party),<sup>70</sup> as well as

<sup>63</sup>Mashad and Yustiningrum, ‘Negara dan masyarakat’; Hasrullah, *Dendam konflik Poso*; Damanik, *Tragedi kemanusiaan di Poso*; Pieris, *Tragedi Maluku*; Azra, ‘Religious-based Civil Society’; Yunanto, *Militant Islamic Movements*; Lay, ‘Kekerasan atas nama agama’.

<sup>64</sup>Mashad and Yustiningrum, ‘Negara dan masyarakat’.

<sup>65</sup>Papilaya, ‘Persepsi lokal’.

<sup>66</sup>Kampschulte, *Situasi HAM di Indonesia*; FKKJ Reports 1998–2004.

<sup>67</sup>Brigadier General TNI (retired) Rustam Kastor (former Commander of Korem XVII/Trikora, advisor to Laskar Jihad), in a discussion with Sri Yunanto on 2 April 2011.

<sup>68</sup>Singh, *Habibie and the Democratization of Indonesia*; Effendy, *Islam and the State*.

<sup>69</sup>Pan Mohammad Faiz, ‘Islam dan persaingan’.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

several Christian civil society groups. For instance, the former Governor of East Nusa Tenggara, Herman Musakabe, has identified three possible risks associated with the inclusion of the ‘seven words’. First, the changes are only applicable to certain religious groups and not to everyone in Indonesia; second, amendments should be expected to strengthen unity rather than cause national disintegration; and third, this amendment would have the ability to cause more losses than gains to the nation’s integrity.<sup>71</sup>

The SI and the WF have also noted that the democratic transition in Indonesia, which was expected to promote peace and freedom, had been undermined by intolerance between and within religious groups. A report presented by SI in 2018 noted 177 cases of religious intolerance by the majority towards minority groups in 2014, which increased to 236 in 2015 and 270 in 2016, later reducing to 201 in 2017 and 202 in 2018.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the WF comprehensively divided acts of religious intolerance into two categories: those carried out by state actors to inhibit freedom of worship and those committed by non-state actors in the form of religious intolerance. In 2016, instances of the former were recorded as 159, and of the latter 156, changing to 95 and 170, respectively, in 2017, and to 130 and 146, respectively, in 2018.<sup>73</sup>

Muslim and Christian tolerance of the other practising religious rituals was observed to have relatively improved but tolerance in political life, worship services, construction of churches and management of education, particularly in areas of Indonesia where Muslims were in the majority, remained problematic. For example, a survey conducted by *Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat* (Centre for the Study of Islam and Society; PPIM) showed that 62.4% of Muslims disagreed with having a non-Muslim president, 55.3% were unhappy with Christian worship services taking place in their neighbourhood, and 51.6% would not allow the construction of churches in their locality.<sup>74</sup> Another survey by PPIM in Aceh, Pidie, Garut, Tasikmalaya, Ciamis, Solo, Mataram, East Lombok, Makassar, Maros and Bulukumba in 2016 found that 87% of respondents disagreed with the appointment of non-Muslims as principals in public schools, 89% disagreed with a non-Muslim being a head of local government, and 81% disapproved of the establishment of places of worship places for other religions in their neighbourhood.<sup>75</sup>

Muslim action against places of worship for other religions, especially Christianity, was found to take four forms: (1) intimidation and rejection of the construction of churches by residents mainly for lack of the appropriate permission and the misuse of buildings, (2) attacks on Christians and vandalism of church buildings by hardline groups, (3) temporary sealing of churches by the local government and security forces to avoid further attacks, and (4) permanent closure of churches and prohibition of church worship by the local government after reports from residents and hardline groups.

Figure 1 shows the number of acts of religious intolerance and restrictions on worship against Christian communities from 1945 to 2020. It shows that instances of restriction of worship were very few under the Old Order (1945–1967); only two churches were destroyed and none recorded to be threatened, temporarily sealed or permanently

<sup>71</sup>Musakabe, ‘Hati-hati mengamandemen UUD’.

<sup>72</sup>Halili, *Melawan intoleransi*.

<sup>73</sup>Wahid Foundation, ‘Ringkasan eksekutif’.

<sup>74</sup>Burhanudin, *Islam dan kebangsaan*.

<sup>75</sup>Indeks, ‘Riset PPIM’.



closed. The number increased under the New Order (April 1967–May 1998), with 444 churches attacked, two threatened, and ten more permanently banned and closed during the 32 years of the authoritarian Soeharto regime, with 145, or over 33%, of the 444 attacks on churches taking place in the last two years of Soeharto's regime (January 1996–May 1998).

These numbers increased significantly in the *reformasi* era, with nearly 700 churches experiencing restrictions on worship from June 1998. Residents were intimidated, 118 churches were refused construction permission, 248 were attacked by radical groups, 56 were temporarily sealed by local security forces, and 261 were permanently closed by local governments on the basis of reports from residents and radical groups. [Figure 1](#) also shows that the number of churches attacked fell from 444 in the New Order Period to 248 in the *reformasi* era, while other forms of religious intolerance and restriction on worship increased dramatically, including intimidation and rejection by residents and temporary and permanent closure of churches by local governments. The data show that only two churches were threatened, none were sealed, and ten were permanently banned during the New Order period but these numbers increased dramatically to 118, 56 and 261, respectively, in the *reformasi* era.

These high numbers in the *reformasi* era show the possible occurrence of ups and downs in line with the dynamics of democratic consolidation in Indonesia. [Figure 2](#), however, indicates that the number of churches that experienced worship restrictions decreased from the early years of the *reformasi* era around 2009, increased from 2010 but fell sharply in 2015. The highest figure for restriction during this era was 81 cases recorded in 1998, which was followed by a series of 'ups and downs' in the following years up to 2010. There were then 78 cases in 2011, slightly fewer in 2012 and 2013, and significantly fewer in 2014 and 2015, reducing to only 15 and 23, respectively.

The information in [Figure 2](#) leads to the argument in this study that the decreasing number of churches that experienced religious intolerance and restriction on worship during the Jokowi administration (2014-onward) is due to the effective implementation of the political platform widely known as *Nawacita* (nine hopes).<sup>76</sup> This agenda generally consists of nine priorities, including the restoration of the state's responsibility to protect the entire nation and provide security for all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, race or religion. President Jokowi was able to achieve this by taking firm action against extremism and intolerance by the implementation of three policies. The first is Law No. 16/2017 concerning Community Organizations, with Article 59 banning community organizations with radical views or committing acts of intolerance based on ethnicity, religion or race. This regulation also served as the basis for dissolving Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, a militant organization that aimed to replace Pancasila and establish an Islamic state in the country. The second involves refusing to extend the registration of FPI, which expired in June 2019, on the grounds that, through the Ministry of Home Affairs, FPI had committed several acts of vandalism and religious intolerance, thus disturbing public order. The third is the publication of a Joint-6-Ministerial Decree in

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<sup>76</sup>*Nawacita* comes from a Sanskrit word that means nine hopes. The term is used to describe nine national development priorities during the Jokowi and Jusuf Kalla presidencies era in 2014–2019. The 'nine hopes' include reforming the system and law enforcement, building Indonesia from the periphery, bringing back the state to protect and provide security for all citizens, building clean, effective, democratic and trustworthy governance, and improving the quality of life for Indonesian people.



**Figure 3.** Reasons for church closure in the *reformasi* era. Source: Data obtained from: Setara Institute, *Intoleransi semasa pandemi*; *ibid.*, *Kebebasan beragama*; *ibid.*, *Melawan intoleransi*; *ibid.*, 'Ringkasan eksekutif'; *ibid.*, *Supremasi intoleransi*; *ibid.* Setara Institute, 'Politik harapan'; Wahid Foundation, 'Ringkasan eksekutif'; FKKJ, *Annual reports*; PGI, *Annual reports*.

December 2020 prohibiting FPI activities and the use of its symbols in order significantly to prevent the organization from mass mobilization and to reduce the religious intolerance that had arisen after 2015.

The previous figures show that the number of cases of religious intolerance and restrictions peaked in the *reformasi* era but Figure 3 sets out the reasons for the permanent closure of places of worship, particularly churches, by local governments.

Figure 3 shows that 110 churches, or 42%, were closed because of rejection by residents with the support of hardline Islamic groups, 32% were closed for misuse, such that buildings licensed to be used as home stores or offices were converted into places of worship, 65 churches, or approximately 27%, were closed or banned for failure to obtain construction permits from the local authorities, while only 1% were closed because they were used for Christianization.

The interesting part is the 1% recorded on the grounds of Christianization, even though Ustad Husein, a cleric from *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Council of Indonesian Clerics), Bandung Chapter, confirmed that this was the primary factor in Muslims' rejection of church construction within their neighbourhood.<sup>77</sup> Apparently, Muslims usually turn down the idea of permitting church construction or any building for Christian worship in their area out of fear that the Christians would use such places for mission programmes. They are also suspicious of churches and Christian worship services in their neighbourhood due to the assumed link between the significant increase in the numbers of converts and the number of church buildings starting from the 1990s.

The former Vice General Secretary of the Local Council of Indonesian Churches in Bekasi, Jokusport Silalahi, confirmed the difficulties associated with obtaining support from 60 residents as a prerequisite for permission for the construction of worship places according to the regulations. He stated that:

<sup>77</sup>Ustad Husein (a cleric from MUI, Bandung Chapter), in a discussion with the authors, Bandung, 14 January 2016.

If you say it's difficult, indeed it is, because there are regulations governing the establishment of places of worship. It's relatively difficult as we socialize in the environment. For example, if we want to build a church, we have to get permission from local residents who are not church users, as many as 60 signatories. This is difficult to fulfill. Even if we get permission from local residents, we still have to get approval from local leaders and the local government, then proceed to a higher level until the process of issuing the letter of permission.<sup>78</sup>

This explanation also led to this study's argument that the threat perception between Indonesian Muslims and Christians in the *reformasi* era originated from Christianization issues on the one hand, and the vision of the establishment of an Islamic state on the other. This further reinforces the statement that Muslims reject the construction of churches and are negative towards Christians out of fear of Christianization programmes. This has normally developed into religious intolerance and restrictions on worship with the support of radical groups and local governments. This process has been observed to have emerged due to the transition in Indonesia to a more democratic political system that gives more power to local authorities and subsequently leads to a greater likelihood of the tyranny of the majority as explained below.

### **The issue of decentralization and the tyranny of the majority**

Political transformation in Indonesia in the late 1990s changed the socio-political situation and inter-religious relations dramatically. A democratic, transparent and accountable government promoting human rights became essential after President Soeharto stepped down, so the new Indonesian political system promoted human rights, empowered society and implemented a programme of decentralization. These ideas ultimately changed the political system as well as Muslim-Christian relations and the power-sharing formula at both national and provincial levels.

The new form of government gives a more significant role and greater authority to local governments, especially regarding the members in the legislature, and changes to the vertical and horizontal accountability processes.<sup>79</sup> This transformation started during the administration of President B.J. Habibie, which passed Law No. 22/1999 and continued with Law No. 32/2004 concerning Regional Government. These laws give members of local parliaments a pivotal role and greater authority.

Law No. 32/2004 requires the transfer of most government functions to local governments but the central government retains control over several matters including those concerning religions, as indicated in Article 10 paragraph 3:

*Urusan pemerintahan yang menjadi urusan Pemerintah sebagaimana dimaksud pada ayat (1) meliputi: politik luar negeri, pertahanan, keamanan, yustisi, moneter dan fiskal nasional dan agama.*

Government affairs that became (Central) Government affairs as meant in paragraph (1) include: foreign policy, defence, security, law, national monetary and national fiscal as well as religious affairs. (Chapter III, Article 10 (3), Law No. 32 /2004)

The decentralization policy related to religious affairs subsequently led to the replacement of Joint Decree No. 01/BER/MDN-MAG/1969 (*Surat Keputusan Bersama* or

<sup>78</sup>Pastor Jokusport Silalahi, (Vice General Secretary of the Local Council of Indonesian Churches Bekasi), in a discussion with Angel Damayanti, Bekasi, 1 February 2016.

<sup>79</sup>Wasistiono, 'Desentralisasi'.

SKB/1969) by Joint 2-Ministerial Decree (*Peraturan Bersama 2 Menteri* or PBM) Nos. 8 and 9/2006. This PBM was jointly issued by the Minister of Religious Affairs, Maftuh Basyuni, and the Minister of Internal Affairs, Moh. Ma'ruf, under Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono's administration, to serve as a guideline for the regional head in maintaining religious harmony, empowering religious forums and establishing places of worship.

This new decree was promulgated on three grounds. The first was the 1969 Joint Decree, which has only six articles, open to multiple interpretations, and was considered to lack procedural details for granting permits for the construction of places of worship. The second was the PBM Nos. 8 and 9/2006, which were used to amend Law no. 32/2004 on Regional Government and Law No 10/2004 on the Formation of Laws and Regulations. The third was to avoid potential future problems. It is important to note that PBM Nos. 8 and 9/2006 allow the local heads to issue permits for the establishment of worship centres and to ensure orderly religious life in diversity.

The PBM, as stated in the Considerations section, is essential for building mutual understanding between religious groups and also focuses on religious harmony and respect for human rights, especially freedom of worship. It also gives regional heads the mandate to (1) maintain peace, order and religious harmony in the community, (2) coordinate activities towards the maintenance of religious harmony, mutual understanding, respect and trust between religious groups, and (3) coordinate with heads of districts and sub-districts to ensure harmonious religious life. Moreover, PBM Nos. 8 and 9/2006 also regulate, in more detail when compared with the other regulations, the scope of the duties of governors, regents, mayors, and even heads of districts on religious affairs and harmony. For example, Articles 8 and 16 in PBM Nos. 8 and 9/2006 give legal authority to regents and mayors to issue licences to build places of worship within 90 days.

The implementation of this law, however, creates unexpected challenges by causing more complexities than the former decree, as indicated by the difficulties in obtaining permits for church buildings. The PBM also provides more restrictions instead enhancing or protecting of Christians' rights to worship. For example, Article 4 requires church management to obtain the signatures of at least 90 church members and 60 local residents as evidence of their consent to the building of a church. This is more complicated than the provisions of the former decree, which only required permission from the head of the region with due consideration for views of the local head of religious service as well as local religious and community leaders. The frequent objections to the construction of churches by neighbourhood residents and the consequent difficulties in obtaining building permits led to the use of any public building as a place of worship.<sup>80</sup>

The decentralization policy also created problems in relations between central and local government, especially in granting permission for church buildings and worship activities, as observed in the construction of *Huria Kristen Batak Protestan* (Protestant Batak Christian Huria; HKBP) Filadelfia church in Bekasi and *Gereja Kristen Indonesia* (Indonesian Christian Church; GKI) Yasmin church in Bogor. The local governments in

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<sup>80</sup>Dr Nurrohman (a committee member of *Jakarta* (*Jaringan Kerja Antar Umat Beragama*/Network for Inter-religious Cooperation), Bandung City, Vice Chairman of *Bashul Masail*, *Nadhatul Ulama*, West Java and Professor in Faculty of *Syariah*, UIN Bandung West Java), in a discussion with the authors, Bandung, 16 January 2016.

Bekasi, Bogor, and Tangerang had to cancel the letter of permission issued by the central government in response to consolidated and vigorous pressure from residents and radical groups, despite the fact that all the administrative requirements and political consents required by the regulations, including appeals won in the Supreme Court, had been fulfilled.<sup>81</sup> In another case, the regent of Tangerang issued a permit to build Barnabas Church on a 4000m<sup>2</sup> plot in Pondok Cabe but militant groups in the area pressured Tangerang local leaders and the Christian community into stopping the construction.<sup>82</sup>

The vision of PBM Nos. 8 and 9/2006 seems good on the paper but lacks merit in implementation and impact. There are at least two critical issues associated with its implementation. The first is the uneven authority given to regional heads to decide on permits for the establishment of places of worship, primarily when it concerns the promotion of human rights. These heads tend to prioritize the maintenance of security and public order over the need to respect and promote religious freedom and the right to worship as the main principle in allowing the establishment of places of worship. In several cases, rejection by the local community, supported by the activities of the radical groups has been the main reason for the refusal of church construction licenses by regional heads.

The second is the fact that the PBM Nos. 8 and 9/2006, which were initially launched to reduce discrimination, ultimately create discrimination in their implementation. This is indicated by the fact that the former decree SKB/1969 required no special conditions such as the signatures of members of the congregation or neighbourhood residents to build a place of worship but only a regular permit used for the construction of an ordinary building. Local governments only needed to check the feasibility, ownership and security of the building. Consent signatures required under the new law give local residents the power to either permit or refuse the construction of a church in their neighbourhood and this impedes religious freedom.

The PGI strongly objected to Article 24 of this legislation, which asked for 90 signatures of congregation members and 60 signatures of local residents to obtain construction permission.<sup>83</sup> According to Pastor Penrad Siagian, the former Head of Testimony and the Wholeness of Creation of PGI, 'This number is tough to reach for Christians living in Muslim-dominated areas, but, they still have the right to worship.'<sup>84</sup> In some cases such as HKBP Filadelfia Bekasi and GKI Yasmin Bogor, the Christians provided the required numbers of signatures but were still rejected and threatened by their neighbours and radical groups, which led to the cancellation of the permission letters previously issued.<sup>85</sup>

Pastor Calvin Jan, the Vice Secretary of *Badan Pekerja Majelis Sinode* (Working Body of the Synodal Assembly; BPMS) GKI 2010–2014, confirmed the oddity related to GKI Yasmin and also warned about the protests against the rejection and the government's decision:

The case of GKI Yasmin is an anomaly because the government had issued a permit to construct churches. However, since the local community continued to object, the local

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<sup>81</sup>Human Rights Watch, 'In Religion's Name', 32, 51.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>83</sup>PGI, *Seputar ijin mendirikan rumah ibadah*.

<sup>84</sup>Pastor Penrad Siagian, MSi (Teol) (Head of Testimony and the Wholeness of Creation, PGI), in a discussion with Angel Damayanti, Jakarta, 13 May 2015.

<sup>85</sup>Human Rights Watch, 'In Religion's Name', 53–4.

government stopped the services accordingly. GKI has never protested publicly to fight for their rights but the choice was made to establish their right to worship.<sup>86</sup>

Majoritarian rule enacted PBM Nos. 8 and 9/2006, which developed into a tyranny of the majority for two reasons: first, the dominance of the majority in approving or disapproving the construction of worship places and, second, the support of the majority in implementing some types of religious intolerance and restrictions on worship. This study, therefore, argues that the issues concerning restrictions on worship in the *reformasi* era were not mainly the result of historical mutual threat perception but were rather due to the change in the political system, which led to decentralization and gave Muslim communities, as the majority population, more significant influence in executing PBM Nos. 8 and 9/2006, not only in terms of drafting regulations but also in their execution and implementation. This exacerbated the existing tensions between the two communities, as is evident in Christian groups' protests to the government, particularly in the cases of HKBP Filadelfia and GKI Yasmin.

### Concluding Remarks

This study results in two novel findings on relations between Muslims and Christians in democratic Indonesia, which can be used as a benchmark to analyse inter-religious relations in other parts of the world. First, the study confirms Azra and Hudson's thesis and the statements by international leaders that Indonesia is a tolerant and moderate country, home to pluralistic religious followers who live in harmony and tolerance within a democratic system. However, the findings of this study also point to the fact that Indonesian Muslim and Christian communities are still locked in mutual threat perceptions arising from the ups and downs of the country's political history, although changes also occurred with constructive cooperation. The political roots of mutual threat perception include evangelization, initially introduced by colonial powers and resumed mostly at the beginning of the New Order, the idea of establishing an Islamic state at the outset of the formation of the state, the political movement to formalize Islamic sharia in the constitutional amendment during the *reformasi* era, the rise of terrorism and fundamentalism using Islamic symbols, and restrictions on worship resulting from the decentralization policy. The study's findings challenge Huntington's thesis, which posits that civilizational and cultural differences are the root causes of global politics. Relations between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia since their first encounter prove the opposite – that it is political ups and downs that shape the quality of Muslim–Christian relations. However, Indonesian Muslims and Christians have also experienced constructive cooperation when they faced colonialism as their common enemy.

Second, the findings of this study also reveal that democratization in Indonesia creates a space for distrust and tension, especially when those in power promulgated regulations that contradict the essential component of civic pluralism and the unitary state of Indonesia. The findings challenge the arguments of Mendez, Dominguez and Jones that a democratic political system that promotes decentralization should bring advantages such as the protection of fundamental rights. According to our study, democratization

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<sup>86</sup>Pastor Calvin Jan (Vice Secretary of BPMS GKI 2010–2014), in a discussion with Angel Damayanti, Jakarta, 12 January 2016.

in Indonesia, while promoting decentralization, has failed to deliver protection for the rights of the Christian minority. The central government, represented by designated ministries, has made regulations that complicate the implementation of worship as freedom of belief. Under these regulations, local governments are powerless to prevent or tackle restrictions on worship and may even be complicit in them. This proves that the democratization of Indonesia lies open to the peril of the tyranny of the majority, which breaches the principle of the protection of the fundamental rights of minority religious adherents. The lack of religious freedom and widespread intolerance are a clear setback and have become a serious challenge to a country that aspires to uphold the ideals of human rights and the doctrine of pluralism and tolerance as the pivotal component of the state's principle of Unity in Diversity (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*).

## Disclosure Statement

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