

## Governing A Plural Society with Privilege

Lailul Mursyidah<sup>1</sup>, Nyong Eka Teguh Iman Santosa<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo,

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya

[lailulmursyidah@umsida.ac.id](mailto:lailulmursyidah@umsida.ac.id)<sup>1</sup>, [nyongeka@uinsby.ac.id](mailto:nyongeka@uinsby.ac.id)<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*Indonesia is a democratic state that provides its citizens with a constitutional guarantee to be treated equally. However, the practice is not always in line with the theory. Governing a plural society in Indonesia has to face empirical challenges of inequality and social injustice. This paper explores how religious majority privilege still affects the ways of public governance. It exposes the optical illusion phenomena of good public governance in Indonesia by using a social justice approach. The study shows the implementation of good public governance is troubled by various unethical practices by state apparatuses at local as well as national levels. Instead of fostering democratic services that treat people equally without discriminating against their primordial backgrounds, the religious majority identity is repeatedly orchestrated in many ways for individuals or institutional advantages at the cost of religious minorities. The results of this research are important and significant to strengthening the exercise of democracy and good public governance in Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** good public governance; privilege; social justice

### A. Introduction

Diversity is an inseparable part of the life of the Indonesian people. So diverse that politically, this reality is a challenge in itself that is not easy to manage properly and correctly. Ruling in a republic that adheres to democracy where every citizen is equal in the eyes of the constitution, could trigger a variety of problems when dealing with relations between citizens who have different affiliations or primordial and functional backgrounds. There are many examples and historical experiences regarding this matter (Ronaldo, 2021) (Hamdi, 2017), whether it is the potential for tensions or conflicts between ethnic groups, religions, and races (Miichi, 2014). This includes potential conflicts between religious traditions (Arifin, 2019). Moreover, religious identity is considered the sexiest and most vulnerable to be used as a tool of politicization (Wijanarko, 2021).

The presence of the nation-state, the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), does not negate the diversity. National identity is an important approach and is needed to knit the universe of differences into one. This means that differences are protected and maintained in a shared space based on consensus. NKRI was not built on the basis of the subjugation of one particular group over another. Nor is there any privilege of a certain group over another

group for reasons of its majority, ethnicity, or religion. With all its diversity, NKRI was built with a national perspective. All citizens sit on the same footing and are equal regardless of their distinct identities.

Therefore, attitudes, behaviors, or policies that show favoritism among the citizens are practices that clearly desecrate and contradict the spirit of national unity and integrity. Contrary to the constitutional mandate which requires them to be treated equally without discrimination because of any primordial background. Ironically, after more than 75 years of independence, Indonesia has not been completely free from this unconstitutional practice. Furthermore, some of them are carried out so vulgarly and shamelessly for various reasons by using political authority or positions held.

This phenomenon certainly shows the urgency and relevance of the critical response to it. The fact of irregularities in the public sphere without any explanation can be seen as justification that this is not wrong and allowed to be done. Moreover, if the activity is practiced by someone who has influence or high rank, then the power of persuasion is far more damaging. Justification for the affirmation of privilege through state apparatuses not only injures the propriety of good public governance but is fundamentally contrary to the constitution of the Republic of Indonesia as a democratic country.

Insofar, as several studies have highlighted this issue from various angles. Among them are Jubba et.al. (2020) and Yusuf et.al. (2021). Both questioned the practice of Christian favoritism over the identities of people of other religions by using knots of power. The first article is of the view that the manifestation of particular religious identity symbols in the public sphere is not only an expression of resistance to the presence of different others but is also evidence of unresolved interfaith tensions. While the second article focuses more on the weak carrying capacity of minority religious groups in the executive and legislative circles of power in Jayapura. So that the practice of granting privileges and freedom of expression toward the majority of religious groups in the same area takes place without any obstacle.

This kind of phenomenon is not unique to Indonesia but can be also found in many countries in Europe, America, and even Africa. For example, the marginalization that minority groups in Britain have to face in order to sustain the dominance and superiority of the Anglican church even in the cramped prison spaces (Beckford & Gilliat, 2005). Meanwhile, in North Macedonia, ethnicity and religion are still fuel for politicization and tensions between citizens (Ivaylo, 2021). In general, most of the people of Eastern and Central Europe still believe that their national identity is closely related to the existing religious identity of the majority. The highest numbers are found in Greece 76%, Romania 74%, Bulgaria 66%, and Poland 64%

(Nyman, 2018). Although the debate about whether or not the use of religious identity is allowed in the public sphere (Zuparević, 2010; Tonolo, 2014; Zhu, 2007), but at least the experience of France and Germany which had issued regulations prohibiting the use of religious symbols for Muslim women became a sign that at a certain point religious symbols can be seen as contrary to the principle of neutrality adopted by a country (Marko, 2012; Toit, 2015). A similar experience can be found in Denmark (Holtug, 2011). An alternative approach might be found in other European countries such as the Czech Republic (Lyapina, 2021) and Greece (Kalampakou, 2019). This means, in general, that the construction of relations between religion and the state as well as the presence of religious symbols in the public sphere are not things that reach consensus among European countries. It differs from one country to another (Kulska, 2011).

Likewise in the United States, even though it is known as a secular country, the influence of religion is very strong. Even its national motto is to mention the name of God (Lienesch, 2019). The long history of this country also records the practice of discrimination and intolerance towards minority groups in order to give privileges to dominant groups, especially White Christians. This privilege survives because of the support of various intertwined instruments of power. They use institutional, cultural, political, legal, and media instruments (Joshi, 2020). The perception of discrimination is still very warm between the majority and minority groups in the United States and even carried over to the workplace (Schneider, 2022; Koura, 2018). This issue of expression in the public sphere with religious symbols is also a problem encountered in its neighboring country, Canada, as shown, among others, through the advocacy case of pro-shari'a groups (Selby, 2013).

Meanwhile, on the African continent, the Mau Mau Community in Kenya also experienced discrimination treatment regarding their minority religious identity, apart from their great contribution to fighting for their country's independence (Kenyatta, 1968). Ndeda (2009) also mentions that many other minority groups have met similar treatment in their country, including Sufi Islam, African Independent Churches, and African indigenous religious groups. Australia is not free as well from similar problems. The growth of ethnic diversity and the cultural and religious backgrounds of the people makes the authorities increasingly pay attention to the importance of the cohesiveness of its citizens. Here, the proper policy can only be formulated if there is an adequate understanding of the opportunities and challenges of the presence of diversity (Ezzy, 2020; Smith, 2017).

The records from various continents and countries further emphasize the urgency and relevance of this issue to be studied more extensively. Especially in the life of the nation and

state in Indonesia which is *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* or unity in diversity, then a comprehensive understanding of this matter becomes a necessity. Its significance is clear because if this issue is not adequately understood and ignored, the consequences can be disastrous. Therefore, moving on from the factual reading, this paper will focus on highlighting two main questions. First, can favoritism occur democratically through granting privileges to certain parties or groups? Second, can the practice of granting privileges to certain parties or groups be categorized as a deviation from good governance or even a violation of the constitution? Through the following reading and analysis, it is hoped that the answers of the questions could be delivered.

## **B. Results and Discussion**

This study approaches the issue of the implementation of good public governance from a social justice perspective. Implicitly, from the beginning, it was assumed that the constitutional aspect that was injured by the issue of favoritism of certain groups or parties over others through the granting of privileges that could not be enjoyed equally was social justice. The next assumption that accompanies the interpretation and analysis process is that there are still ongoing such practices that are the focus of this study in Indonesia. Even so, conclusion-making or inferences based solely on speculation is avoided. Any claims are based on databases that can be accessed in the public sphere. A space where anyone also has access to and is potentially exposed to the impact of its persuasive power.

### **Favoritism**

Privilege refers to certain social advantages, benefits, or degrees of prestige and respect that a person has based on belonging to a particular social identity group (García, 2018). From here the concept of privilege can refer to a variety of objects including race, gender, or perhaps ethnicity and religion. Privilege is a complex topic. Therefore, it is very possible to attend following various situations, lifestyles, and demographics so that basically "Privilege is not a dirty word," said Jackie Ferguson (2021). But in practice, the granting and affirmation of privileges in the public sphere through state or government instruments that should put themselves in a position to treat their citizens equally can be something to be reproached with.

When policies, both political and economic, are made by giving benefits to certain individuals or groups of people because of their particular identities by excluding other individuals or groups simply because their identities are different, then the practice of favoritism occurs where privileges for groups like the religious majority benefit from a public policy while religious minorities do not. Identity politics that treats the affirmation of privilege

unequally is favoritism that in principle tarnishes the practice of good public governance (see Tolchin, 2010; Mitchell, 2014). Unfortunately, this is still common in practice in Indonesia.

For example, how favoritism occurs through symbols of the Christian religion in the city of Jayapura, Papua. Although its autonomous status does not mention it as a Christian city, the Christian identity is so dominant and gets support from political and bureaucratic authorities in Jayapura's circle of power. These approaches and public policies are sure to spark jealousy in other religious communities in this city (Yusuf et.al., 2021).

### **Constitutional Abuse**

Securing and maintaining unity in the midst of differences is not only a need or demand from the government, but it is an obligation both on the basis of humanitarian and constitutional morality (Nasution, 2017; Syafingi, 2017). Through packages of laws, Indonesia has actually shown serious efforts to provide guarantees and protection to its citizens regarding the expression of their ethnic, religious, and cultural identities. However, this guarantee and protection of human rights in practice often encounter obstacles that are not easy to overcome when dealing with the facts of the society where the difference is salient (Shah, 2016). The implementation of the principles of good governance sometimes clashes and is not in harmony with the local characteristics of the people in Indonesia (Handayani, 2019).

This does not necessarily mean that a person or party who has the authority can use his position and authority to take actions that deviate from the constitution and legislation. It is true that government leaders in the realm of public administration have a kind of discretion in the process of leading their territories. But this can be tolerated as long as it is in line with the goals and ideals of the constitution for the common good and prosperity (Siti, 2018), not for the benefit of some parties at the expense of others, even though they are a minority.

Differences are actually not only the cause of contestation, disintegration, tension, or conflict. For example, religious differences can be managed as a potential to enlighten and educate the public so that they can respond and live side by side peacefully in diversity. The key lies in whether the policymakers have the will to make it an opportunity or vice versa. An interesting example is the analysis of Moe (2019) as well as Mayhew (2022) and Frediani (2020) which make the education space a medium for transforming society to be more aware, educated, and tolerant of differences. Santosa and Istikomah (2020) also believe the same thing. Even cinematic products can also be used as a medium for this transformative role (Kristi, 2019). Meanwhile, actors who can contribute to this endeavor are actually not only limited to the state but can be from nonstate and also cross-gender. Women, for instance, can take an active role strengthening relations between different communities (Pajariantio, 2022;

Rohmaniyah, 2022). The involvement and collaboration of stakeholders can be a social capital as well as a praxis to solve problems (see Sekhaulelo, 2022).

In addition, the Indonesian people have local wisdom that is able to negotiate and transform differences peacefully and non-violently. The study by Said & Santosa (2021) proves that public responses to government policies and to different views can be managed properly. If the parties who have influence perform the role of effective communication, then resistance and potential tensions and conflicts in the community can be relatively avoided. The community basically has the ability to adapt and even transform situations that are less than ideal to be in harmony with the context of their social and cultural environment, and the structure of their beliefs. At this point, dialogical skills in the midst of diversity are competencies that are absolutely needed by citizens living in Indonesia (Pabbajah, 2021).

Religious symbols in certain contexts have also been proven to function as sites that bridge harmonious relations between religions or beliefs. Instead of cutting unity, they become knitters for unity. This is shown, for example, by the Meru Temple, Mayura Temple, Lingsar Temple, and the Topar War festival which unites the Muslim and Hindu communities in West Nusa Tenggara (Muhtar, 2021). There is also the Tahuri monument in Central Maluku which is a symbol of social and cultural cohesiveness between religiously different communities, Christians and Muslims (Dandirwalu, 2020). The state and the government should take this kind of wisdom as a lesson to build and develop a more just pattern of relations between citizens of the nation. Instead of being enthusiastic about producing narratives and works that become symbols of exclusivity and particularity in the public sphere in the name of democracy or the aspirations of the majority at the sacrifice of constitutional propriety, minority groups feel they are not treated equally and are marginalized. Because if this is the case, then at the same second, the constitution has actually been violated and abused.

### **Optical Illusion**

Good governance is actually a principle that must be used in government management to improve the quality of development in an area (Mursyidah, 2017). Through existing legal products, Indonesia can be said to have carried out comprehensive arrangements related to good governance, especially the affirmation of clean government principles, including expediency, justice, and legal certainty (Zamroni, 2019). In practice, there are at least four factors that will affect the success of a government, namely the leadership, a good partnership and cooperation amongst governance actors, the availability of well-educated civil servants, and the maximization of local-owned resources (Al-Hamdi, 2020; see also Butnaru, 2013).



In this context, state power must be understood as a space that is never closed from the pressure of forces who want to push particular agendas which may be considered by interested parties as good but ignoring the consideration that it can harm the principles of a nation-state. Indonesia has passed such experiences. Even residues from past experiences often seep and creep back to the surface at certain moments. The neighboring country, Malaysia, can also be used as an example of how the state is an arena of struggle for various interests that are not sterile from sectarian agendas (Editor, 2009).

Reflecting on the experience of the United States, Joshi (2020) found that the practice of discrimination and social injustice can take place unconsciously, even by the perpetrators themselves. The concept used to explain this issue here is an optical illusion. First, it has the effect to make the public eyes as if they do not see any social injustice that is in front of them. Second, even if they see something, what they see doesn't appear as it should. When this optical illusion touches the realm of power and the public sphere, its impact can be systemic, not only exposing certain individuals or small groups. In short, when a policy that benefits the majority group is carried out with various justifications, it seems as if it is then not wrong and good. On the other hand, when the benefits are enjoyed by the majority, it doesn't shut the chance that the losses must be borne by the minority. Because since the beginning, their existence and interests, including their minority identity have been ignored and marginalized from public policy considerations that should place all citizens equally and fairly.

The following factual examples can confirm that optical illusions are real and often affect public stakeholders. First is the issue of sharia-inspired regulations. The implementation of these regulations had been in the spotlight at the national level before there was a policy that required the entire legal system to obey the legal hierarchy in Indonesia. Many lessons can be learned from this experience. How then can partial religious aspirations be fought for so as to obtain accommodation and facilitation through formal legislative and executive channels. Debates and differences of opinion inevitably do occur. However, notes and field studies do confirm that sharia-inspired regulations in certain contexts are not always negative as are often assumed, such as concerns about discrimination (Saraini, 2018; Fanani, 2017; Kamil, 2014). Likewise, regarding the motives behind the birth of these regional regulations, it turns out that the driving factor is also not singular. Political motives certainly play a role, but the background of the leader is also suspected to take a part (Muhtada, 2019; Wanto, 2012; Efrinaldi, 2014).

Second is the issue of installing Asmaul Husna (God's good names) in public spaces. For example, the installation of 99 Asmaul Husna boards on the protocol road in Babelan, Bekasi. It was conveyed by community leaders that if this was motivated, in addition to beautifying the

environment, there was also a desire to remark the area as a religious and santri area. The local leadership, namely the Babelan sub-district head, even attended to witness the installation (BeritaCikarang.Com, 2022). This practice is certainly not something new. This has been done even for a long time in many cities in Indonesia. The reasons are relatively similar. The Regent of Blora when asked about the Asmaul Husna marking the town square also stated the reason that it was the people's aspiration to make the face of the city more religious (Nathan, 2021). Even in some places, there are not only Asmaul Husna boards, but Asmaul Husna monuments are built, such as in Sukabumi (Sumardi, 2018) and several other cities.

The government's task is actually to create policies that are able to give birth and at the same time channelize the common will in the midst of a pluralistic society. Because it is in an encounter that understands each other that conflicts of interest in the name of differences in identity can be muted (Apud, 2019). However, the most crucial thing in building understanding between these different communities is representation. How then can each party find its place and feel not neglected, marginalized, or even abandoned (Hedges, 2019). If the two examples above are noticed, it appears that the policies in the public sphere are not yet symmetrical with the spirit of the constitution and good governance. The favoritism of the majority group, in this case Muslims, by providing privileges through state or government instruments is still happening. Whereas if it is referred to the spirit of the teachings of Islamic law itself, minority groups, in this example non-Muslims, have rights that are equal to other citizens who are majority within a nation-state (Muddasar, 2021).

It should be understood that religious symbols in communication practice can be managed according to the interests of those who use them. It is intended to promote or strengthen its influence or on the contrary to reduce and weaken its meaning (Beyers, 2013). So when the Chief of Staff of the Army of the Republic of Indonesia was actively involved in organizing a soccer competition with the branding Santri League, actually the practice of majority favoritism had been carried out (Editor, 2022). Apart from the good intentions and usefulness, the word Santri is a term that refers to a community group with a religious identity that cannot accommodate other groups that are categorically not identified as santri (see Nixon, 2020).

### **C. Conclusion**

The implementation of Good Public Governance in Indonesia from the perspective of social justice is still not wholly free from unprofessional practices. The privileges of the



majority group are often affirmed by the power in the executive, legislative, and even state security circles to gain public sympathy or alignments that in principle deviate from the constitution. Sectarian favoritism should no longer occur in the Indonesian nation-state, which affirms the equality of all its citizens regardless of their differences in primordial identities, including religion. Good public governance must run not only procedurally but must be substantial without any optical illusions that break integrity and social justice.

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