

Why Does Discrimination Against Indigenous Beliefs Persist in Indonesia?

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Abstract

The number of adherents of traditional beliefs in Indonesia is approximately 12 million, spread across 27 provinces. However, despite this significant number, they have not yet been recognized by the state as equal to formal religions in the religion column on their Identity Cards (KTP). This study employs a descriptive-qualitative method based on a critical paradigm, using Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony as its analytical framework. The findings reveal that state hegemony began with the consensus to label traditional beliefs as "faith streams" through the Ministry of Religion in 1961. This was followed by political, ideological, and leadership hegemony through various discriminatory laws and regulations targeting those identified as adherents of traditional beliefs. The Constitutional Court's decision to allow the inclusion of "Belief in the Almighty God" in the religion column of the KTP represents a form of resistance to hegemony through intellectual movements.

Keywords: *Hegemony; Traditional Beliefs; Formal Religions; Antonio Gramsci*



Introduction

What pride can we truly take in the narrative that Indonesia is composed of thousands of islands, with hundreds of ethnic groups, traditions, cultures, and religions, when in reality, the state officially recognizes only six religions? Local religions are treated like stepchildren – or worse, illegitimate children – who are not acknowledged. According to data from the Ministry of Education and Culture, as cited in a journal article by Giuseppe Scalvado and Syarip Hidayat titled "*Designing Motion Graphics on Tolerance Towards Adherents of Karuhun Urang Traditions in Cigugur*", there are 187 traditional belief systems in Indonesia (Scalvado & Hidayat, 2018).

From the same source, it is noted that around 12 million adherents of traditional beliefs are spread across 27 provinces in Indonesia (Scalvado & Hidayat, 2018). However, these adherents have not yet been granted equal recognition by the state in the religion column of their National Identity Cards (KTP). This issue has been a longstanding polemic, although there have been some improvements in policies. For instance, during the New Order era, adherents of traditional beliefs were forced to conform by selecting one of the recognized religions in the KTP column (Pradnya, 2021).

Later, adherents who refused to choose one of the six state-recognized religions were required to leave the religion column blank. Forcing them to merge their beliefs into existing religions constitutes a violation of human rights and a breach of Article 29, Paragraph 2 of the 1945 Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion and worship in Indonesia (Iftitah et al., 2022).

The enforcement of filling out the religion column in accordance with the options provided has resulted in many adherents of traditional beliefs converting to one of the recognized religions listed in their KTP. However, most do so merely for administrative compliance (Hasbullah et al., 2022). Some adherents, however, remain steadfast in their customs and beliefs, opting to leave the religion column blank, which carries administrative consequences. These include being unable to create family cards

(KK) or birth certificates, apply for civil service positions, join the police force, or access education (Andika, 2019).

In addition to these challenges, adherents of traditional beliefs often face stigma, such as being labeled heretics or deviant. This stigma is accompanied by social exclusion, with cases of children from these communities being denied access to schools (Gardanita & Widodo, 2020). Such discrimination will persist unless the government intervenes by providing security guarantees and freedom of religion, particularly by formally recognizing adherents of traditional beliefs in the KTP.

After a prolonged struggle by adherents of traditional beliefs, a legal challenge was brought against Article 61 paragraphs (1) and (2), as well as Article 64 paragraphs (1) and (5) of Law No. 23 of 2006 on Population Administration, in conjunction with Law No. 24 of 2013 on Amendments to Law No. 23 of 2006. This culminated in the Constitutional Court Decision No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016, which allowed adherents of traditional beliefs to list "*Kepercayaan Terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*" (Belief in One Almighty God) in the religion column of their KTP (Andika, 2019; Futuhaat, 2022).

However, researchers observe that discrimination still exists, as what is listed is not the name of their religion but rather a general statement of belief. This is distinctly different from the six state-recognized religions, which are explicitly stated in the KTP. In other words, the government has yet to equate adherents of traditional beliefs with the six officially recognized religions in Indonesia (Penatas et al., 2020). The government's regulations and the experiences of adherents of traditional beliefs present a compelling subject for study. Therefore, this research employs Gramsci's theory of hegemony to analyze the issue.

Method

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative method rooted in a critical paradigm. The critical paradigm emphasizes comprehensive, contextual, and multilevel analysis while positioning itself as a participant in the process of social transformation (Jufanny & Girsang, 2020). Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony is utilized as the analytical framework for this research. Gramsci, being a socialist, was

significantly influenced by the political thoughts of Marx and Engels. According to Gramsci, hegemony is not a relationship of domination through the exercise of power but a relationship of consent through political and ideological leadership. This contrasts with its original meaning in Greek, which refers to the domination of one nation over another (Siswati, 2018).

In Gramsci's view, hegemony refers to an organized consensus where subordination is achieved through the ideological domination of the hegemonic class. When Gramsci discusses consensus, he relates it to a psychological spontaneity encompassing acceptance of sociopolitical rules and other regulatory aspects. Consensus arises for several reasons: fear of consequences for non-conformity, habitual adherence to established objectives, and awareness or agreement with certain elements. For Gramsci, consensus is created based on an underlying agreement. However, it does not mean that the working class perceives the social structure as desirable but rather lacks the conceptual framework to understand social realities effectively (Siswati, 2018).

Gramsci identifies two factors that contribute to the lack of a conceptual framework for the working class: education and institutional mechanisms. Existing education systems fail to cultivate the critical and systematic thinking abilities of the working class. Meanwhile, institutional mechanisms (schools, churches, political parties, mass media, etc.) serve as tools of the ruling class to impose a dominant ideology. It is essential to underline that the distinction between political society and civil society should not be understood as if the two are separate entities with clear boundaries. Fundamentally, both are formed from various social relations that evolve into multiple organizations, allowing for overlaps to occur.

Furthermore, Gramsci argues that where there is power, there is resistance against it. In advanced capitalist societies where civil society is already developed, a different strategy is needed to counter dominant power. Gramsci terms this strategy the "war of position." In this strategy, the working class must dismantle the defensive systems that uphold bourgeois hegemony by building alliances with all social

movements striving to change societal relations within civil society. The hegemonic power of the bourgeoisie, exercised through organizations within civil society, must be continually weakened by consolidating counterforces under the leadership of the working class. Gramsci asserts that if the working class seeks to rise from its subordinate position to lead the nation and foster political consciousness through moral and intellectual reform, it must create its own organic intellectual class.

Discussion

The Consensus on Labeling Religion as a Belief System

One thought-provoking statement by Pramodya Ananta Toer suggests that fairness must begin in thought. This concept seems essential when addressing the perception of local religions in Indonesia. If adherents of the six religions officially recognized by the government are referred to as "believers," why are adherents of local religions referred to as "followers"? This distinction reflects how the government exerts hegemony through narrative (Sukino, 2018). In truth, there is no universal definition or fixed criteria for what constitutes a religion, except as defined by each religion itself. It is inherently unfair for academics—or even governments—to define someone else's religion, as such definitions are likely subjective. However, in Indonesia, the government has established definitions of religion that often marginalize local religions (Widianto & Hasanah, 2024).

The government has at least twice issued official definitions of religion through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, in 1952 and 1961. In 1952, the Ministry proposed that a religion must meet minimum criteria: the existence of a prophet, a holy book, and international recognition. Due to pressure from various groups, particularly those practicing local religions or so-called belief systems, this definition was rescinded (Al-Qurtuby & Kholiludin, 2019).

In 1961, a revised definition emerged, stating that a religion must include a holy book, a prophet, belief in the supreme power of a single God, and a legal system for its adherents. This definition was concretely implemented through Presidential Decree No. 1 of 1965, which officially recognized six religions. Later, under Law No. 5 of 1969,

the recognized religions were reduced to five: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Al-Qurtuby & Kholiludin, 2019). This approach not only marginalizes local religions but also reflects a systematic hegemony, dictating the narrative and institutional framework through which religion is understood and acknowledged in Indonesia.

Confucianism was excluded as an officially recognized religion through the Ministry of Home Affairs Circular No. 477/74054 in 1978. It was not until the early 2000s that Confucianism was reinstated as one of the “recognized” religions, following the revocation of this circular. Observing the 1952 policy by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, it becomes evident that the government implicitly sought to exclude local religions.

A key indicator of the consensus intended to be fostered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs was the emphasis on international recognition. This raises a critical question: Was the government aiming to establish a framework for religions practiced within Indonesia or for those recognized globally? Why is international recognition relevant for religions adhered to by local communities? This clearly demonstrates the government's hegemonic control over the labeling of religions. Although this consensus ultimately failed due to resistance from followers of local beliefs, the Ministry issued a new definition of religion in 1961. Based on this definition, the government should have used it as a foundation to recognize local religions – referred to by the government as “belief systems” – in official identity documents like the KTP (Indonesian Identity Card). Instead, the number of recognized religions narrowed to five, and later expanded to six.

This failure to implement the 1961 consensus reflects how the government exerted hegemony over the meaning of religion. Referring to the 1961 Ministry of Religious Affairs decision, the government should have recognized local religions as official state religions. While not all belief systems qualify as religions – such as Susila Budi Darma, which is merely a spiritual practice – many belief systems do meet the criteria of a religion.

Hegemony in Leadership, Politics, and Ideology

The history of discrimination against followers of local religions – classified by academics and the government under the consensus term “belief adherents” – dates back to the Dutch and Japanese colonial periods, continuing through the Old Order and New Order regimes. One example is the experience of the Djawa Sunda Religion in Kuningan and Tasikmalaya, West Java (Waluyajati, 2017). As documented by Tedi Kholiludin in the book *Agama dan Kepercayaan Nusantara*, the Djawa Sunda Religion faced discrimination during the Dutch colonial era when Prince Madrais, its founder, was exiled to Ternate for resisting the Dutch. During the Japanese occupation, followers of the Djawa Sunda Religion were prohibited from conducting their religious activities (Al-Qurtuby & Kholiludin, 2019).

Under the Old Order regime, during the Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII) rebellion led by S.M. Kartosoewirjo, Djawa Sunda religious sites (paseban) were burned. Furthermore, they encountered challenges with Law No. 22 of 1946 regarding the registration of marriage, divorce, and reconciliation. The Djawa Sunda followers opposed this law because registration required adherence to one of the six recognized religions, whereas they wished to practice their rituals according to their own traditions and customs (Al-Qurtuby & Kholiludin, 2019). Another example of governmental hegemony is reflected in Decision No. 001/KTPS/DM/1964, dated February 12, 1964. This decree, issued by *Panca Tunggal* of Kuningan Regency, banned and dissolved the Djawa Sunda Religion on the grounds that it was deemed disruptive. This decision represents a form of hegemony exercised through institutions to establish a consensus within society regarding the Djawa Sunda Religion.

Furthermore, the government, through the Supervisory Body for Community Beliefs (PAKEM), issued Decision No. 01/SKPTS/BK.PAKEM/K.p./VI/64. This regulation deemed marriages conducted under the Djawa Sunda Religion confusing to society and a source of public unease, thereby disrupting public order. Such measures had adverse effects on both society at large and the followers of the Djawa Sunda Religion (Al-Qurtuby & Kholiludin, 2019). From these examples, it is evident

that the government's hegemony over local religions, including the Djawa Sunda Religion, operates through three mechanisms: leadership, politics, and ideology. The Djawa Sunda Religion lacked prominent leaders advocating for their rights within government structures. Political actions create ideologies that are codified into regulations, ultimately shaping public consensus.

According to Gramsci, consensus is achieved through three factors. *First*, fear of consequences. Followers of the Djawa Sunda Religion experienced violence and suppression, such as the burning of their places of worship and the prohibition of their religious activities. *Second*, habituation to certain practices. Consensus is solidified when regulations and societal norms are established, leaving individuals little choice but to conform. *Third*, acceptance of certain elements. The followers of the Djawa Sunda Religion were compelled to accept pre-existing consensus in the form of regulations.

This consensus was not the result of local religions willingly adopting the regulations or social structures but rather stemmed from a lack of conceptual foundations enabling them to effectively challenge societal realities. Gramsci identifies two main reasons for the lack of conceptual foundations: education and institutional mechanisms. Existing educational systems fail to cultivate critical and systematic thinking and institutions like schools, churches, political parties, and mass media serve as instruments of the ruling class to perpetuate dominant ideologies.

This analysis aligns with the experiences of local religious adherents. They lack access to conceptual foundations, both in education and institutional representation. Their children, for instance, are often denied entry into schools (Gardanita & Widodo, 2020) due to regulatory consensus. Moreover, they lack institutional support to advocate for their beliefs. Without these fundamental resources, local religious adherents remain marginalized, unable to resist the hegemonic structures imposed upon them by the state.

War of Position

Gramsci asserts that where there is power, there is resistance. In advanced capitalist societies where civil society is well-developed, different strategies are required to challenge dominant power structures. Gramsci refers to this strategy as the "war of position." This concept is highly relevant for local religions striving for equal recognition alongside the six officially recognized religions in Indonesia.

According to Gramsci, if the working class seeks to rise from its subordinate position to assume leadership of the nation and foster political consciousness through moral and intellectual reform, it must develop its own organic intellectual class. Similarly, adherents of local religions have begun to cultivate their own intellectual leaders, as evidenced by their successful constitutional challenges in the Indonesian Constitutional Court (MK).

In addition to filing constitutional challenges, adherents of the Parmalim religion in North Sumatra are actively advocating for the inclusion of their religious identity on national ID cards (KTP) in the same manner as the six state-recognized religions (kumparan.com). The Constitutional Court's ruling that permits the term "Belief in God Almighty" to appear in the religion column of ID cards is a clear example of resistance to hegemony through intellectual movements. This resistance exemplifies a modern "war of position," where marginalized groups utilize intellectual, legal, and institutional mechanisms to confront and dismantle dominant narratives and structures. By engaging in these efforts, local religions assert their right to equality and recognition in the face of longstanding hegemonic practices.

Conclusion

Approximately 12 million people in Indonesia identify as adherents of indigenous faiths. Despite this sizable population, they are not afforded the same recognition as the six officially acknowledged religions in terms of their status on national ID cards (KTP). The government has employed various strategies to assert hegemony over these communities, often referred to as "indigenous faith adherents." This hegemony originated with a policy introduced by the Ministry of Religious

Affairs in 1961, which classified indigenous faiths as "belief systems" rather than religions. Over time, this was reinforced through discriminatory laws and regulations that reflected leadership, political, and ideological dominance over these groups. A notable resistance to this hegemony emerged through a Constitutional Court ruling that permitted the inclusion of "Belief in God Almighty" in the religion column of ID cards. This decision signifies a critical intellectual effort to counter systemic discrimination and advocate for the rights of indigenous faith communities.

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