

# Religion, Nationalism, and Ethics in Political Campaigns

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## Abstrak/Abstract

*Artikel ini mengkaji penggunaan unsur-unsur agama dalam kampanye politik di Indonesia dari perspektif etis. Penulis berpendapat bahwa penggunaan isi agama dalam kampanye politik adalah kerugian dari sudut pandang etis - khususnya teleologis - karena menyimpang dari tujuan akhirnya untuk mencapai kebaikan yang lebih besar. Untuk mendukung argumen ini, tulisan ini meneliti penggunaan isi agama untuk tujuan politik dari sudut pandang etika teleologis yang mengacu pada karya-karya dalam etika, etika politik, dan komunikasi serta pemikiran tentang nasionalisme.*

This article examines the use of religious elements in political campaigns in Indonesia from an ethical perspective. The author argues that the use of religious contents in political campaigns is detriment from an ethical – specifically teleological – point of view as it deviates from its ultimate purpose of achieving the greater good. To support this argument, the paper examines the use of religious contents for political purposes from a teleological ethics point of view referring to the works in ethics, political ethics, and its communications as well as thoughts on nationalism.

## Kata kunci/Keywords:

*Etika, etika komunikasi, nasionalisme, agama, teleologi, utilitarianism*

Ethics, communication ethics, nationalism, religion, teleology, utilitarianism

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## Introduction: Voting as a Political Act

A favorite teacher of mine, Dr Heri Priyono<sup>1</sup>, opened his lecture on political philosophy with the question: “Why is voting (in an election) a political act?” As students of philosophy, we were to answer by providing sound arguments. The discussions lead into what “political” in this context means. The standard definition describes politics as acts that relate to the welfare of the state. Therefore when one votes, they would rationally and purposely choose a candidate that they believe best suited to lead the state (or municipality, province, and country) for the welfare of its citizens.

Beyond the obvious, it means that reasons for choosing leaders should be based on the rational assessment of the candidates’ qualifications in statesmanship. In essence, it should be how the candidates would fare in their position as the state’s leader; hence, it should be based on rational judgments, not the popularity or likeability, or worse the religion or ethnicity, of the candidate. Contrary to this, however, flawed democracy often creates the opposite: most candidates

<sup>1</sup>Dr Henri Priyono is Head of the Master’s Programme at the Driyarkara School of Philosophy. The event referred to was his opening statement when starting his lecture on Philosophy of Politics in 2014.

are chosen based on their popularity and not necessarily by their aptitude in statecraft. This explains why in many cases, public figures such as actresses, businessmen, or singers gain just as many or more votes in running for office than the career politicians. Without proper understanding of what politics entail, people tend to choose popular, but not necessarily the best, candidates to represent and lead them.

The latest example was the recent Jakarta gubernatorial election, in which religious and ethnic fervors seem to contribute significantly to the defeat of the then incumbent Jakarta Governor Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama by current Governor Anies Baswedan. Aside from the pros and cons, appropriateness of campaign messages, and integrity of the candidates, we can see that religious and ethnic issues played a significant role in the supposedly normative context of politics.

This article will analyze the use of religious (and/or ethnic, in the case of Indonesia) elements in political campaigns in Indonesia from an ethical perspective. The author would present his argument, followed by definitions and method of examination, and discussion to support the argument.

### Analyzing the Issue in the Context of Indonesia

The author argues that from the perspective of ethics, particularly the teleological ethics, the use of religious issues in political campaigns is detrimental as it deviates from the ultimate purpose of the act of achieving the highest good.

The highest good in this case is borrowed from Aristotle's definition of the ultimate form of happiness - *eudaimonia* - in which "it is desirable for itself, it is not desirable for the sake of other good, and all other goods are desirable for its sake."<sup>2</sup> From the utilitarian outlook, it refers to the kind of goods that is best for all, or at least the majority, of the Indonesian people.

The definition of nationalism adopted in this paper is "loyalty and devotion to a nation; especially a sense of *national consciousness* exalting in one nation above all others and placing *primary emphasis on promotion of its culture and interests* as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups."<sup>3</sup> This definition is applicable solely to Indonesians who identify themselves as an Indonesian (as their nationality, being a member and resident of the country, abiding to its laws, etc.) first and foremost, regardless their ethnic origins or religious beliefs.

Religious (and/or ethnic) contents in this article is broadly defined as the use or reference of religion (and sometimes accompanied by ethnicity) embedded in part of or overall political campaigns to the advantage of a group using the reference and to the disadvantage of the group's opposition. In this paper the author examines the use of reli-

gious and/or ethnic contents during the period of electoral campaigns, both regional or national, in Indonesia. However, the author believes that the argument's validity extends beyond the context of elections.



Figure 1: Banners on Mosques

Source: Pos Kota ( <http://poskotanews.com/2017/03/13/sat-pol-pp-koordinasi-tertibkan-spanduk-tolak-salat-jenazah-pendukung-ahok/>, accessed September 18, 2017)

An example of the practice of using religious and/or ethnic contents during the period of electoral campaigns is the use of banners on mosques declaring the mosques' refusal to conduct *Janazah* prayers (collective prayers performed to seek pardon for the dead) for those who support the then Jakarta Governor Ahok's reelection bid as he is deemed blasphemous (a false accusation which emerged following the spread of a controversial edited video depicting Ahok as anti-Islam). Another example is the National Mandate Party's (*Partai Amanat Rakyat* or PAN) billboard campaign saying "defend Islam, defend Indonesia". The wording of the campaign, that is putting Islam ahead of Indonesia, indicates that religion comes first before the country.



Figure 2: Billboard Campaign

Source: GoRiau.com June 5, 2018, <https://www.goriau.com/berita/gonews-group/para-ulama-dan-umat-islam-alumni-212-berharap-partai-koalisi-satu-barisan-di-pilpres-2019.html>, accessed June 18, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu>aristotle-ethics>, accessed 5/5/2018

<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster, [www.merriam-webster.com>nationalism](http://www.merriam-webster.com>nationalism), accessed 7/5/2018, emphasis in italics are mine.

A more subtle form of the practice is a widely publicized social visit of Amien Rais, the head of PAN, and Prabowo Subianto, the head of the Great Indonesia Party (*Gerakan Indonesia Raya* or Gerindra), to Rizieq Shihab, the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam* or FPI) in Meccain June, 2018.<sup>4</sup> Cherian George (2017:151) described FPI as the most notorious organization in spreading hate against its opponents. FPI is not a radical group in the traditional sense (i.e., giving blatant support for acts of terrorism), but it does resort to force and intimidation against its sponsors' or clients' opposition. In acting on behalf of its clients, FPI uses Islam and religious rhetoric to justify their use of force and intimidation. According to the law, conducting a meeting between political parties and militant religious organization is legal, but despite its legal status, it is apparent that PAN's and Gerindra's visit to FPI was the parties' attempt to strengthen their political standing by using religion.

The author will examine the use of religious content for political purposes from the teleological ethics perspective by referring to several works in ethics, political ethics and its communications, as well as nationalism. To be clear, this paper is not to label the use of religion in politics as legal or illegal, right or wrong, but rather to analyze whether such practice is in accordance to the purpose of ethics, namely to bring good for all (e.g., improving welfare of the general public).

### Teleological Ethics

The term "teleology" is derived from the Greek words *telos* (end) and *logos* (reason). Combined, the term refers to a theory of morality that "derives duty or obligation from what is good or desirable as the end to be achieved".<sup>5</sup> In short, whether one's action is good or bad can be measured by the action's intended end, not the action itself. A comprehensive study of teleological ethics can be found in Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, with English philosophers, namely Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mills, and Henry Sidgwick developed a branch of teleological ethics called utilitarianism in the 19th century. Rather than focusing on Aristotle's individualist concept of *eudaimonia*, utilitarianism bases its concept on the idea of the common good, or popularly phrased as "the greatest happiness of the greatest number".

According to Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is ultimate and happiness is not merely pleasure nor temporary. The purpose of action should be rational, rather than emotional or illogical (e.g. one eats because one is hungry is an instinctive action

as one does not eat because one is already full). Furthermore, the result of an action must also result in optimum happiness. For instance, while living in a comfortable home may make one happy, living in a comfortable home with one's family makes one even happier. Hence, according to Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, one should choose the latter as it brings more happiness.

Utilitarianism, on the other hand, develops Aristotle's *eudaimonia* even more by broadening the scope of the common good's recipients; one's action should bring collective rather than individual benefits (Sudharminta, 2013:129).

Taking the above into consideration, based on the utilitarian perspective, Indonesian elections should aim to improve and promote the welfare of the *overall* Indonesians rather than the welfare of particular groups only, in this case the Indonesian Muslims or Indonesian Islamic groups. Thus, political and electoral campaigns should be in accordance with the wellbeing of the overall Indonesians, rather than particular groups or actors only.

### Religion and Nationalism

Using nationalism and religion as a unifying force is not a new phenomenon. Memmi (2016) wrote that while the leftist Europeans predicted that independence movements conducted by the European colonies in Africa and Asia would bring about a revolution in the class system, the revolution was actually caused by a spirit of nationalism, in which religion and ethnicity also intersect, which united the colonized against the colonizers. Now that the post-colonial era has long passed and many, if not most, independent countries have freed themselves from the colonial rule, this militant (often authoritarian) nationalism which employs ethnic and religious rhetoric should become irrelevant in modern democracy. However, it still persists.

Such persistence may be due to the fact that politics is part of and influenced by culture, which is constantly changing and evolving. Consequently, politics is also volatile. According to Bauman (1999), it is normal if one's identity comes from a sense of belonging to their community. In the past where one's sense of community was limited by physical transportation and communication – human muscle or horses (what Bauman calls "wetware"). As we now live in a digital world, problems caused by distance diminished and the physical totality becomes an imaginary one.

Bauman further defines nationalism as a response to the emergence of new social changes. Nationalism is described as a result of the modern concept of universal citizenship, and for nationalism to manifest, it requires an exchange of information. However, in the era of postmodernism, in which there is no one universal truth, people must be open to sharing (giving and receiving) information without fear of losing one's own identity. There are people, nevertheless, who are

<sup>4</sup> Up to the time this paper was written, Rizieq despite several times stating that he would return to Indonesia still resides in Mecca. Rizieq claims his long stay in Mecca is for religious purposes though it is assumed as the media reports that he is avoiding the law of the accusations of pornography against him.

<sup>5</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, [www.britannica.com/topic/teleological-ethics](http://www.britannica.com/topic/teleological-ethics), accessed 6/7/2018

reluctant to change and thus exclude themselves to new information due to fear of the erosion of their firmly-held communitarian values once well guarded through physical boundaries.

Given the unique traits of postmodernism, not all people are willing or able to accept new ideas (and truths), and those who are not often prefer to believe the less complicated one ultimate, single truth, which is offered by conservative, religious groups. The communitarian group, who often prefers to believe in one universal truth, often gets into a state of anomie<sup>6</sup> and believes that its unique communitarian values, once protected by physical distance, need to be shielded from external influences. This results in a “we” versus “them” condition, and consequently the “we” promotes the “I”. This type of community, thus, renounces the state-sponsored national identity and its characteristics in order to preserve their own communitarian values. This type of group is the most susceptible to the manipulation of political actors vying for support.

Religion can, thus, be used as a “justification by irresponsible groups for their own vested interests”, and since religion is an important element in Indonesia, followers of religion become “the easiest entry point for mass mobilization.” (Hilmi, 2009:100). Religion, therefore, can be the state’s Achilles heels and easily taken advantage of (Magnis-Suseno, 2015:131-134). Without a strong government, it would be easy to manipulate religious issues and create conflicts between different groups or even in the same group. In Indonesia, for instance, it would be easy to accuse someone as deviant, blasphemous, or unlawful, as illustrated by FPI’s and other hardline Islamic groups’ use of force against the followers of Ahmadiyah who are denounced as deviant.

### Indonesia’s Democracy and the Rise of Populism

It is without a doubt that the founding fathers of the Republic of Indonesia’s decision to formulate and set Pancasila (loosely translated to Five Principles) as the ideological foundation of the state and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (translated to unity in diversity) as the national motto is wise. The fourth principle of Pancasila on democracy is translated to “Democracy led by the wisdom of the representatives of the people”, yet the principle’s original wording in Indonesia, *Kerakyatan yang dipimpin oleh hikmah kebijaksanaan dalam permusyawaratan perwakilan*, conveys a deeper message compared to the translated version. The fourth principle contains the message of *musyawarah untuk mufakat*, loosely translated into a process of sincere deliberation as a means to reach an unanimous agreement. This is different with the oversimplified definition of democracy, that is a decision made by the majority. The essence of democracy is that every citizen has an equal say, while according to Pancasila, it is im-

perative for representatives to reach a resolution satisfactory for all, even for the minority.

In term of its national motto, Indonesia’s *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* celebrates the religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversities among Indonesians and how these diversities become the bedrock of the nation which unites the people. By celebrating the diversities instead of forcefully transforming the people to become homogenous, a sense of unity and peaceful co-existence become possible.

Taking the above as consideration, the author believes that Pancasila and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* convey the same message with Aristotle’s *the Art of Rhetoric*’s, which stipulates that democracy is realized when “public offices are assigned by lot” and that the most important essence of democracy is freedom (Aristotle, 1994:102).

Though democratic system in Indonesia was first introduced in 1945 following the country’s independence, real, or at least close to real, democracy emerged only half a century later. As the first President of Indonesia, Sukarno was appointed president for life until his fall in the 1965. After Sukarno was dethroned, the second President of Indonesia Soeharto ruled the country for nearly three decades. Under Sukarno’s and Soeharto’s leaderships, democracy was curbed. Despite their shortcomings, however, Indonesia’s first two presidents’ quasi-democratic administrations still managed to make one significant contribution to the country: establishing and preserving the secular government of Indonesia. In regard to Sukarno, the president managed to maintain the delicate balance of power between three major political factions at that time, namely the nationalist, religious, and communist factions. He did this by consolidating the three factions into one political concept named *Nasakom* (the abbreviation of *NASionalisme* (Nationalism), *Agama* (Religion), and *KOMunisme* (Communism)). Meanwhile, Soeharto, with the support of the army, managed to maintain the country’s secular government by consolidating his power and strictly monitoring, regulating, and curbing any type of social organizations, including the religious and political ones.

Following Soeharto’s downfall in the late 1990’s, real democracy finally started to flourish in Indonesia. Citizens were granted electoral rights and could vote for their preferred candidate. With this euphoria, however, came also the downsides of democracy.

Of late, we have witnessed how the presidential campaigns in Indonesia mimic those in the United States of America. During the period of presidential campaigns, voters may measure the candidates based on two considerations, which are the candidates’ reputations or “image” and the candidates’ proposed policies or “issues.” But as time goes by, “political narratives that have come to dominate post-reform campaigns have made issues ever more subordinate to images. Thus populist discourse has placed judgments of

<sup>6</sup> A condition of an individual or society resulting from a breakdown of standards and values or lack of purpose or ideals (Encyclopaedia Britannica, www.britannica.com>sociology ethics, accessed 6/7/2018)

candidate motive at the very heart of the matter (Lee, 2000: 43).

To win votes, candidates, thus, often choose to win the heart of the voters by demonstrating empathy to them, and this is often when the rhetoric of victimage emerges. The wordings of the candidates' campaigns are usually those that support or incite dissatisfaction among public with the ruling government (Lee, 2000: 44). Campaigns become fertile ground for hate speech. The rise of digital social media, to certain extent, exacerbates the situation as now everyone has a chance to spread hate speech and hoax. In this case, the internet has become an anti-dialectic platform defying the ethics of media, namely upholding truth, open for discussion, and creating platforms for exchanging ideas, which aim to assist the media consumers to build an opinion (Whillock, 2000: 85).

A good example of the spread of hate speech and hoax in media is the spread of a music video on the internet produced by a group notoriously known for its anti-President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo rhetoric and its #2019GantiPresident (#2019ChangePresident) movement. The song on the music video contains a lyrics, "*Tidak mau presiden yang memenjarakan ulama*" (We do not want a president who incarcerates clerics). By using a religious term such as "*ulama*" meaning, the group uses the lyrics to insinuate a message that Jokowi's government is against the Muslims or even Islam.

Furthermore, during campaign periods in Indonesia, non-Aristotelians arguments, or more like accusations, about Jokowi's government allowing foreigners, particularly Chinese, to control *pribumi* (native Indonesians) are frequently deployed. Similar arguments about the government work in favor of non-Muslims rather than Muslims are also often conveyed in political campaigns. Candidates manipulate these issues to gain support, and usually, those who are in the state of anomie or unable to cope with the current postmodernist era will readily support these candidates and the arguments that they present, no matter how ungrounded they are.

## Discussion

The main value of ethics, from the perspective of utilitarianism, is to promote happiness not only to self, but also to people in general. Taking the values of utilitarianism into consideration, the objectives and benefits of political campaigns, thus, should revolve around the greater good. In the case of Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017, according to utilitarianism, the objective of the election should have been advancing the common interests of the Jakartans. Thus, it should have been devoid of religious issues as Jakartans are not religiously homogenous.

The political campaigns prior to last year's Jakarta gubernatorial election were heavily imbued with hate speech against the then Jakarta governor Ahok. A Christian of Chinese descent,

his ethnicity and religion were particularly targeted, resulting in his defeat. The case of Ahok demonstrates the severity of the use of religion in swaying the public mind, proving the author's argument concerning the role of religion in winning the majority votes.

The author believes that votes that are based on the candidates' identity, either their religion or ethnicity, was not rational as they rested upon emotional or affective reasoning.<sup>7</sup> It may be safe to assume that a significant portion of 58% of Jakartans who voted for Anies Baswedan chose him not because of their predilection for the former Culture and Education Minister, but rather because of their dislike for Ahok caused by bitter accusations of Ahok's blasphemous action. The campaign against Ahok, however, contradicts the nature of utilitarianism as instilling religious values in political campaigns only affects voters with particular religion, in this case Muslims. In an attempt to win the Muslims' votes, the interests of the minority are often forgotten. Hence, the objectives of utilitarianism, that is advancing the common good of all people, including the minority, cannot be realized during the election.

Realizing the effectiveness of manipulating religious issues in political campaigns in order to gain popularity and votes, politicians may resort to irrational political reasoning as its narratives, such as hate speech, may attract a significant number of voters. Taking advantage of people who are in the state of anomie and people with strong communitarian values is often the preferred strategy to acquire support from the masses. Using religion as a rallying cry, enforcing the "we" versus "them" mentality, and spreading the victimage rhetoric become a common practice. This strategy did work in uniting Indonesians and winning independence from the colonial rule in the second half of the last century. However, in our current modern democratic society, where electing leaders and representatives should be based on sound and rational reasoning, such strategy is no longer appropriate.

The opponent of the above argument may argue that in order to create the greater good, one must gain power first, with whatever means. Only after gaining power can one work for the benefit of all. In addressing this argument, the author argues that this "the ends justify the means" (Machiavelli, 1513/2008) mentality not only disregards moral considerations such as honesty or decency, it also contravenes the essence of Aristotelian democracy, namely freedom. Meanwhile, should the purpose is securing power, then it is not a democracy but rather a tyranny (Machiavelli, 1513/2008). Thus, the proponent of using religious issues in political campaign is not necessarily wrong, but such strategy may be more suitable to be employed in a tyrannical rather than a democratic society.

<sup>7</sup> This does not necessarily mean that all Jakartans' votes were based on irrational considerations as Ahok still managed to win 42% votes, most of which were from Muslims.

Specifically, in the case of Indonesia, its national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* clearly indicates the country's recognition of diversity, mainly but not limited in religion, ethnicity, customs, and language, as the foundation of its notion of nationalism that is based on diversity and unity. Similarly, Indonesia's ideological foundation Pancasila, particularly the fourth principle, stipulates the country's adoption of democracy in which all opinions are respected and decisions on public policies are deliberated by all in order to find solutions acceptable for all including the minority.

This means that in Indonesia's idea of nationalism, acknowledgement, acceptance, and respect to diversity is a must. Political campaigns that use and place religion above nationalism, thus, contradict this notion of nationalism; by prioritizing religion over nationalism, religious diversity may become a divisive rather than a unifying tool. The concept of nationalism in Indonesia, therefore, should continue being based upon diversity, including in religion, as if not, irresponsible actors may manipulate the diversity among people to provoke social division and lead to the loss of national identity. Therefore, employing religious issues in political campaign will not promote the universal good, that is the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

One may challenge the above argument by referring to Aceh's special region status and the province's implementation of Sharia; if one province is allowed to embed religious matters in its state administration, then why prevent political campaigns' use of religious rhetoric in other provinces? This question, to certain extent, can be answered by the complex history of Aceh. Under the colonial rule, Aceh was an independent state. It had its own embassies in Europe and was one of the very few (if not the only) kingdoms on which the Dutch actually declared war in the late 19th century. Aceh never surrendered to the colonial rule, although it was occupied by the Dutch, and it remained an independent state when it voluntarily chose to join the Republic of Indonesia during the latter's struggle for independence. For this, Aceh was granted its special region status and an autonomy to implement its preferred legal discourse, in this case the Sharia. The whole process was relatively voluntary as well as there was no dissent amongst the Acehnese, and the local administration also did not prohibit those who disagreed from leaving Aceh. Hence, the author believes that the fact that the embedded religious aspects in Aceh's history, culture, and daily life only re-emphasizes how the diversity between Aceh and the rest of provinces in Indonesia in fact provides a reason for Acehnese to identify themselves as Indonesians.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, from the perspective of utilitarianism, employing religious rhetoric in political campaigns is detrimental to creating the greatest happiness for the greatest number due to the following arguments:

First, the use of religious issues in political campaigns is discriminative in nature as such strategy often prioritizes particular religious group over the others. In the case of Indonesia, the use of religious rhetoric in politics usually benefit only the Muslims, contradicting the value of utilitarianism which emphasizes the importance of *all* members of the society regardless their background.

Second, using religious rhetoric in political campaigns often results in people acting based on irrational evaluations. In contrast to Aristotle's rhetoric which highlights the importance of rational judgments in assessing one's arguments, religious rhetoric often resorts to irrational judgments that are emotional or affective in nature. Moreover, similar with Aristotle's rhetoric, modern democracy should also be based on logical reasoning. The use of religious content in political campaigns, therefore, not only belies the Aristotelian rhetoric, but also the prerequisite of modern democracy.

Third, employing religious rhetoric in political campaigns contradicts Indonesia's adopted philosophy which is represented by the country's ideological foundation Pancasila and national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. Both depicts the country's celebration of diversity among its people. Regardless, the use of religious content in political campaign shows the opposite, that is pitting people from one group (Muslims), against another group (non-Muslims). Thus, diversity divide people instead, destroying the founding fathers' dream of fostering a sense nationalism based on diversity.

Lastly, the author would like to point out that he does not perceive the use of religious issues in communication strategies as unethical, inappropriate, bad, or wrong. Employing religious issues can be effective when conducted in a positive way, such as raising money for victims of natural disasters or for other social causes that are not divisive in nature; and in the other spectrum using it negatively is highly effective as a tool to unify a people against a common foe. However, the author does want to emphasize that in some practices, employing religious rhetoric in campaign can discriminate particular groups and jeopardize common interest. In such practices, the use of religious rhetoric will not bring the greatest benefits to the greatest number in Indonesia, a modern, secular, democratic society which upholds nationalism above all.

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