

Comparative Study of Religious Liberty in America and Indonesia

Muhammad Saleh Mude¹, Dorothy E. Lovett²

HIU, Hartford, Connecticut, USA

* Email: ¹salehmude@yahoo.com, ²dorothylovettbuckley@gmail.com



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* Corresponding Author



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Abstract. This article attempts to briefly look at the similarities and differences in the initial conditions for the formation of the two countries: the United States of America and Indonesia, especially in the dynamics of the relations between statesmen and religious leaders, including political relations with religious issues at the beginning of independence until the present. In fact, since 1776, the United States government has chosen a secular-democratic form of state that guarantees freedom of various kinds, and may not protect a particular religion. On the other hand, in Indonesia, although since 1945, the government of the Republic of Indonesia has guaranteed freedom of religion for everyone, in reality, discrimination and persecution of the majority against minorities still often occurs in the name of defending a particular religion.

Keywords: The United States of America, Indonesia, and issues of religious liberty.

Abstrak. Artikel ini mencoba menjelaskan secara singkat kondisi awal tentang persamaan dan perbedaan negara Amerika Serikat dengan Indonesia. Persamaan dan perbedaan yang dimaksud relevansinya pembentukan kedua tersebut, khususnya dalam dinamika hubungan antar negarawan dan tokoh agama, termasuk hubungan politik dengan masalah agama pada awal kemerdekaan hingga saat ini. Padahal, sejak 1776, pemerintah Amerika Serikat telah memilih bentuk negara demokrasi sekuler yang menjamin kebebasan dalam berbagai jenis, dan tidak boleh melindungi agama tertentu. Di sisi lain, di Indonesia, meskipun sejak tahun 1945 Pemerintah Republik Indonesia telah menjamin kebebasan beragama bagi setiap orang, pada kenyataannya diskriminasi dan persekusi terhadap kelompok mayoritas terhadap minoritas masih sering terjadi atas nama membela agama tertentu.

Kata Kunci: Amerika Serikat, Indonesia, dan Isu Kebebasan Beragama.

INTRODUCTION

The United States of America and Indonesia are two democratic countries and both formerly belonged to two European countries. America was colonized by the British and Indonesia was colonized by the Netherlands. America proclaimed its separation from Great Britain on July 4, 1776 and celebrated its first Independence Day after a long war. Indonesia had its Independence Day on August 17, 1945 when it declared its desire to be separated from the Netherlands.

Since there was a distance of 169 years between the two events, it is right to call America the father of democracy. If one says that Indonesia has been learning modern democracy. American chose to be a secular republic, while the country of Indonesian is known as a Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, based on Pancasila or the five main pillars (Bashir, 2021).

The United States opened a consulate general office in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia on November 24, 1801 when Indonesia was still a colony of the Netherlands. The relationship between the U.S. and Indonesia grew stronger after Indonesia's independence in 1945, which led the American Government to open an Embassy in Jakarta. America appointed the first ambassador, H. Merle Cochran on December 28, 1949, when the U.S. President was Harry S. Truman. In turn, the Indonesian government opened its embassy in Washington D.C. and sent its first ambassador, Ali Sastroamidjojo in February 1950 (The New York Times, 1975; Usembassy, n.d.).

This paper attempts to briefly compare the two countries, especially with respect to their political and religious histories. The first president of the U.S. was George Washington (1732-1799) and Indonesia's first president was Soekarno (1901-1970). Throughout its political history, America has had 46 presidents and Indonesia has had only seven presidents. The President of the United States today is Joseph Biden and Indonesia's is Joko Widodo (Britannica, 2016; Whitehouse, n.d.).

The current population of U.S. (2022) is 334,805,269, a 0.57% increase from 2021, making it the third most populous in the world after China and India's. The current population of Indonesia according to the UN's estimates as of July 1, 2022, is 279,134,505 (Macrotrends, 2022; World Population Review, 2022). The Indonesian population is fourth largest in the world.

The number of adherents to Islam and Christianity in each country is counted as follows: the U.S. is dominated by Christians, at around 86% and Indonesia's is dominated by Muslims, at around 86% (Bayu, 2021; PRRI, 2021). The U.S. today is known as a modern country, a super power, and a

center for the study of democracy, economics, science, and technology, all in the context of diverse cultures. Meanwhile, Indonesia is still a developing country and has a lot to learn from the American government. This situation is easy to understand, since Indonesia has experienced independence for only 77 years, after being colonized by several European countries, including Japan, but predominantly by the Netherlands for 350 years (Weebly, n.d.).

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method by examining data and documents related to religious freedom in America and in Indonesia. A reading of the history of the emergence of America and Indonesia as nation states that were free from colonialism and the long relationship between the two became one of the reasons as well as a comparative perspective in understanding the development of religious freedom in the two countries. Historical data with its various dynamics becomes a measuring tool in understanding the religious attitudes of the American and Indonesian people as different realities, especially in the relationship between religious communities as part of the state's attitude towards religion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Initial Dynamics

The early histories of the United States and Indonesia have similarities. Both of them faced a lot of dilemmas and polemics when their founding fathers focused on formulating the shape of their states. America's founders were divided into two camps, the statesmen represented by George Washington (1732-1799), John Adams, Jr. (1735-1826), Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), and others, and the religious leaders, represented by the Puritans and Evangelical Christians such as Samuel Willard (1640-1707), Elisha Williams (1694-1755), Isaac Backus (1724-1806), John Leland (1754-1841), John Wesley (1703-1791), George Whitefield (1714-1770), Zabdiel Adams (1739-1801), and others. History says that ultimately America's early leaders chose a secular form of state, even though in daily life the people were very close to the Protestant Christian tradition. In fact, the President of the United States has most always been a Christian, even if it is not written in law (Witte & Nichols, 2016).

Meanwhile, Indonesia's early history, shares these characteristics with the American story, as Indonesian leaders are also divided into two camps. There was the nationalist camp, represented by Soekarno (1901-1970), Mohammad Hatta (1902-

1980), Alexander Andries Maramis (1897-1977), Abikoeso Tjokrosoejoso (1897-1968), Muhammad Yamin (1903-1962), and others. The other camp, made up of Islamic representatives, have fought for the form of a religious state, and they have been represented by Ki Bagus Hadikoesoemo (1890-1954), Wahid Hasyim (1914-1953), Kasman Singodimejo (1904-1982), Teuku Mohammad Hasan (1906-1997), and others. But, history records, Indonesia's early leaders agreed to choose the form of a unitary state based on Pancasila or the five main principles that have always been referenced in state management and national leadership (Butcher, 2021; Fogg, 2019).

Pancasila is not a state religion. Instead, Pancasila's values are extracted from Indonesian cultural heritage and enriched by religious values, especially Islamic tradition. However, Indonesia is not a religious state, but a democratic one. To this day, the government and the people of Indonesia have agreed to hold general elections when voting for president and vice-president every five years. The number of terms is limited to two, for a maximum of 10 years. This rule came into effect after the Reformation Era in May 1998 (*20 Years on, Indonesia Considers Legacy of Its "Reformation,"* n.d.; Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998).

Religious Issues

Both the people of the United States and the people of Indonesia since independence and to the present have always been familiar with religious issues (Nieuwenhuis, 2012). Each aim to be a progressive community, so the dynamic makes for a culture that is constantly advancing and evolving. It is a fact, a reality, and a natural law that their government must accept.

Various issues regarding religion arise in both the U.S. and Indonesian society and have always attracted the government's attention. The names of the institutions or departments that have the authority to deal with such issues are also alike. For example, religious cases in America are brought before trial court by citizens, and sometimes reach the U.S. Supreme Court. In addition, the U.S. government has a special department and commission that monitors the development of the dynamics of religious liberty in almost all countries, as written by Witte:

"Each year, the U.S. State Department and the Office of International Religious Freedom, together with the related U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, report on the state of religious liberty around the world. These reports judge the laws, policies, and activities regarding religion in various nations in light of prevailing international norms of

religious liberty. This reporting helps to shape U.S. foreign policy, because these bodies make recommendations to Congress and the executive branch on appropriate diplomatic, economic, and even military responses to countries that fall short of international standards on religious freedom." (Witte & Nichols, 2016)

The difference between the U.S. is that every time there is a religious case in Indonesia, it often involves the security forces, especially the police because of the symptoms of anarchism from the followers of the majority religion to the minority. Common cases involve prohibition or restriction of practices by adherents of minority religions such as Shia, Ahmadiyah, and Christianity (Amal, 2020; Criticism & 2015, 2016).

For example, minority religious adherents are strictly prohibited from building houses of worship in the midst of the majority Muslim community. Several cases of conflicts between minority and majority religious adherents have concerned the construction of places of worship such as churches and the organization of ritual worship on religious holidays (Amnesty International, 2013; Gilbert, 2020; Widianto, 2021).

The main reason that the majority forbids minorities to build houses of worship is the fear of the spread of a new religion. That approach is different from the reality in America.

CONCLUSION

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the Indonesian government and people have lived independently for only 77 years and are still learning to be a democracy, especially from the United States government. Thus, it can be understood if religious issues still often arise and have not been handled properly.

However, in general, the efforts and methods of the Indonesian government is to provide religious freedom in a fair and sustainable manner. All religious adherents have been worshipping for a long time. Many regulations and laws have been issued to encourage religious harmony in Indonesia. Many religious leaders are alumni of Islamic education or religious studies received in the United States and Canada.

The founders of the Republic of Indonesia and the government today have guaranteed freedom of belief as stated in Article 28E paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution which reads in full: *"Everyone has the right to freedom to believe in beliefs, to express thoughts and attitudes, according to his conscience"*.

The right to religion is a human right that cannot be reduced under any circumstances. The state guarantees the independence of each of its

inhabitants to embrace their respective religions and to worship according to their religion and beliefs.

I am one of the scholars who is optimistic about the future of pluralism as one of the pillars of modern democracy. A tolerant and inclusive lifestyle always has a place in the minds and hearts of Indonesian scholars and leaders, especially modern Muslim scholars. To this day, we are still active and continue to improve various instruments. We pioneer and hold various dialogue forums, seminars, and meetings of all religious leaders in Indonesia.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the democratic and pluralistic lifestyle enjoyed by the majority of adherents of various religions in Indonesia has attracted the interest of several world leaders and scholars from abroad. Those from the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Turkey chose to study pluralistic lifestyles and religious moderation in Indonesia.

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