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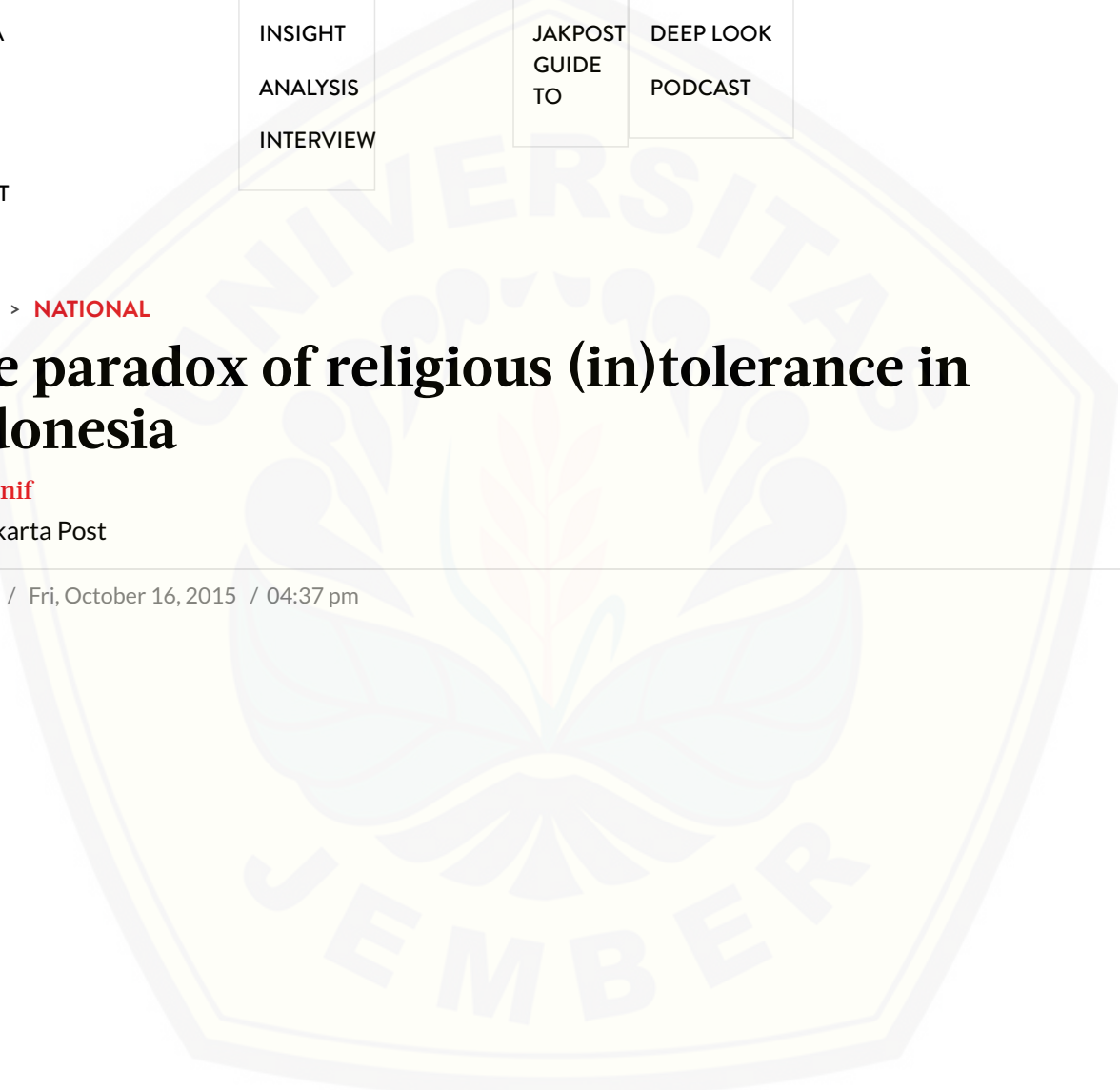
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The paradox of religious (in)tolerance in Indonesia

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The Jakarta Post

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Indonesia has once again witnessed religious violence, this time a clash between a majority group and a minority. The violence occurred in Aceh Singkil, and resulted in the destruction of a church, one man dead and others injured. Not long ago a similar incident occurred in Tolikara, Papua, when a mosque was burned down by a violent mob from a majority community.

These two, and other, religious-violence incidents demonstrate the deficiency in religious pluralism in the country that was long ago introduced by the founders of Indonesia.



Religious pluralism is in fact acknowledged not only in the Constitution but also in Pancasila as the ideology of the nation.

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This means that similar religious violence will potentially occur around Indonesia especially in a region where a majority religion manipulates religious solidarity among its members to persecute members of minority religions.

The majority also uses religion as the primary source for validating the rights of others. They consider a certain minority right, such as building a place of worship, as conflicting directly with democratic values and needing to be eliminated to avoid tensions in society.

Therefore, a violent mob generally targets a particular place of worship as a symbol of the minority's existence.

The complex relationship between the majority and minority illustrates that even though Indonesia is not a theocratic state, religion in Indonesia still has a significant role in shaping identity among the people.

Thus for many Indonesians, solidarity on the common ground of religion is more important than social and economic reasons. This solidarity generally creates a web of common understanding among adherents of a particular religion.

The government then faces challenges to preserve religious pluralism because of the demand from the majority to restrict the rights of minorities. The majority usually attempts to persuade the government to adopt intolerant policies against minority rights.

Consequently, the government in some cases including in the Singkil case decides to close down a particular place of worship in the name of preserving public order and the protection of the followers of minority religions.

The government generally refers to the Joint Ministerial Decree on the Administrative Procedure of the Construction of Places of Worship (Decree on Places of Worship) to justify its policies.

Yet, this regulation is effectively intolerant against the rights of religious minorities because it requires all religions including minority religions to obtain the signatures of a certain number of people who support the building of a place of worship.

For example, each religious organization is required to obtain 60 signatures from people surrounding who agree to support the establishment of the place of worship and agreement from 90 people who will use it.

The requirement of a certain number of signatures to build places of worship asserts that all religions that are a minority in a certain region may potentially become victims and face difficulties in building their places of worship.

In Singkil Aceh for instance, the Christians decided to build 'illegal churches' because as a minority they faced difficulties in obtaining the minimum number of signatures from their neighbors to support the building of a church. This also may happen with Muslims in a predominantly Christian region.

The Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB) whose main task is to oversee the establishment of places of worship is still monopolized by majority religions.

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monologue consensus rather than a dialogue.

This is because the Decree on Places of Worship stipulates the FKUI should mirror the composition of believers in

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government must explain how a minority religious group without a place of worship can get support from the majority if most people still perceive religious difference as a threat rather than the nature of religion.

This means that places of worship are a cause of strife among religions. They represent the core identity of believers and hence result in solidarity among the congregations.

When there is a conflict between two different religious solidarities, it is very likely that the conflict will end in mass violence.

The religious violence in Singkil demonstrates that some people still use religious sentiments to utilize negative stereotyping and antipathy against minority religions even though some others also succeed in using religion as social engineering to create peace and harmony among religious adherents.

The writer is studying at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and is writing a PhD dissertation on protection of religious minorities within Islam in Indonesia.

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