

Conflict and politicized religion: The case of a study on electoral democracy in Jambi Province

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal the conflicts based on intolerance and politicized religion in the electoral democracy process that is developing in Jambi Province. This study is critical because the phenomena reflect a relationship between social and political groups in the threat of disharmony and polarization. This study employed qualitative methods. Data were collected through observations and in-depth interviews. Data analysis was performed through data reduction, data display, and conclusions that were analyzed using the theory. The results of this study show that social conflict is rooted in intolerance and politicized religion. Second, intolerance in Jambi Province is manifested as discrimination against minority groups based on religious values. Third, the politicization of religion at the grassroots level during the electoral democracy process is a crucial factor in conflicts that threaten social rifts. Specifically, the issue of intolerance and conflict in Jambi Province can be formulated through three main interrelated contexts: intolerance based on religious values, social conflict, and political identity. This study is expected to contribute to the study and reveal the reality of intolerance and socio-political conflict that tends to be hidden in the local community landscape both in Jambi Province and other regions in Indonesia.

Keywords: intolerance, social conflict, politicised religion, electoral democracy

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



1. INTRODUCTION

Jambi Province is one of the regions in Indonesia that has a society with a high level of diversity, both in terms of religion, ethnicity, culture, and social background (Mila, 2004). This diversity is essentially a wealth that can enrich social values, strengthen the spirit of togetherness, and serve as a foundation for inclusive regional development in Indonesia. However, in reality, group differences can sometimes cause problems in society and politics if not handled properly. The problem of intolerance and social conflict in Jambi Province is an important and interesting topic to study because it shows that relations between different religious and social groups in this area do not always run smoothly. Jambi has long been known as a peaceful province with various communities living side by side. However, various types of intolerance have recently emerged, leading to differences of opinion.

This problem not only stems from religious differences, but is also influenced by social and political problems that can disturb public peace. First, religious intolerance in Jambi has been widely discussed in research conducted by Equivalent (2023) and Foundation (2023), which recorded a number of cases of rejection of the establishment of places of worship, such as churches and temples, still occurring in several districts and cities. This indicates that differences in belief remain a source of social tension that threatens harmony among adherents of different religions. Second, social conflict is often the result or trigger of intolerance, as explained in this study. Fadhilah (2024) on social dynamics in Jambi, where inter-group conflicts usually stem from misunderstandings and a lack of space for inter-religious dialogue. In addition, Julita (2024), Tahir (2024), Volunteer (2000), Faridah and Mathias (2018), and Kurniawan and March (2018) show that in the context of general elections, religious and ethnic issues are often exploited by political elites to gain support, which ultimately deepens social polarization. Therefore, based on these findings, it can be concluded that religious intolerance, social conflict, and political interests are three interconnected factors that contribute to the emergence of socio-political conflict dynamics in Jambi Province.

This study aims to explore cases of intolerance and socio-political conflict in Jambi Province by examining how religious, social, and political factors interact to shape the dynamics of community life. To strengthen the analysis, this research is based on several complementary theories and provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics of intolerance and socio-political conflict in Jambi Province. The Theory of Politicization of Religion explains how political actors often exploit religious teachings, symbols, and identities to gain power, legitimacy, or public support. In the Indonesian social context, including in Jambi Province, religion, which should be a source of morality and peace, is often used to strengthen certain political bases. In the Jambi context, this theory is relevant for understanding how religious issues can be manipulated for the benefit of power and how this triggers social conflict and intolerance among religious communities.

2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative. Qualitative methods focus more on gaining an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon by obtaining data in the form of words, narratives, and descriptions, not numerical or statistical data. In general, qualitative research is a method that aims to systematically analyze social phenomena and human behavior in their original context. The data collection process in this research is descriptive and interpretive, so that researchers can capture the complexity and meaning contained in the phenomenon being studied, rather than just measuring or calculating certain variables. Furthermore, qualitative research can provide rich and comprehensive insights into the social dynamics that occur. To obtain data, researchers use several methods, such as interviews, observation, or using relevant literature and documents. These three approaches play an important role in collecting the necessary information and data which can later support research findings.

Furthermore, the data management process is carried out regularly by following the guidelines of qualitative experts, especially according to Miles and Huberman (1994) and Spradley and Huberman (2024). Data management starts from the data collection stage to the preparation of analysis results, with

the aim of ensuring that the information obtained truly reflects social reality in the field. Based on Miles and Huberman's point of view, data management consists of three important stages, namely, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Spradley & Huberman, 2024). Meanwhile, based on Spradley's ethnographic analysis model, data management is carried out through four consecutive stages, namely domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, component analysis and cultural theme analysis (Wijaya, 2014). At the domain analysis stage, researchers identify general categories from data obtained from the field, such as forms of intolerance or sources of social conflict. Then, in taxonomic analysis, these categories are found in more specific relationships, for example between religious conflicts and local political interests. Component analysis was conducted to examine differences in meaning between existing categories, while cultural theme analysis was used to identify the social and cultural values underlying Jambi people's behavior in responding to differences. All stages were conducted iteratively and reflectively, with researchers continuously comparing and interpreting data to find consistent patterns. By combining the Miles & Huberman and Spradley frameworks, this research produced in-depth, structured, and contextual data management, thus providing a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of intolerance and socio-political conflict in Jambi Province.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Social conditions and intolerance issues in Jambi Province

The socio-cultural diversity in Jambi Province does indeed present a very valuable wealth, but at the same time opens up a gap for the emergence of various social conflicts and intolerance issues. According to Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 7 (2012), Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 7 of 2012 concerning the Handling of Social Conflicts. Social Conflict, hereinafter referred to as Conflict, is a feud and/or physical clash with violence between two or more community groups that lasts for a certain time and has a wide impact that results in insecurity and social disintegration so that it disrupts national stability and hinders National Development. Furthermore, in Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 7 of 2012 concerning the Handling of Social Conflicts, Conflicts can originate from first, problems related to politics, economics, and socio-culture second, feuds between religious communities and/or inter-religious communities, inter-tribal and inter-ethnic third, Disputes over village, district/city, and/or provincial boundaries; Disputes over natural resources between communities and/or between communities and business actors and fourth, the unequal distribution of natural resources in society (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Indonesia, 2014).

The issue of intolerance and socio-political conflict in Jambi province Throughout 2010 to 2021, we experienced quite complex socio-political dynamics, where the issue of intolerance was one of the contributing factors influencing stability of community life. Reflecting on Figure 3 below, which shows the number of conflicts that have occurred, one of which is based on ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (SARA). Over the past ten years, Jambi Province has frequently faced various complex issues, one of which is the emergence of increasingly debilitating symptoms of intolerance. These problems not only impact the social dynamics of the community but also significantly impact sociopolitical stability in the region.

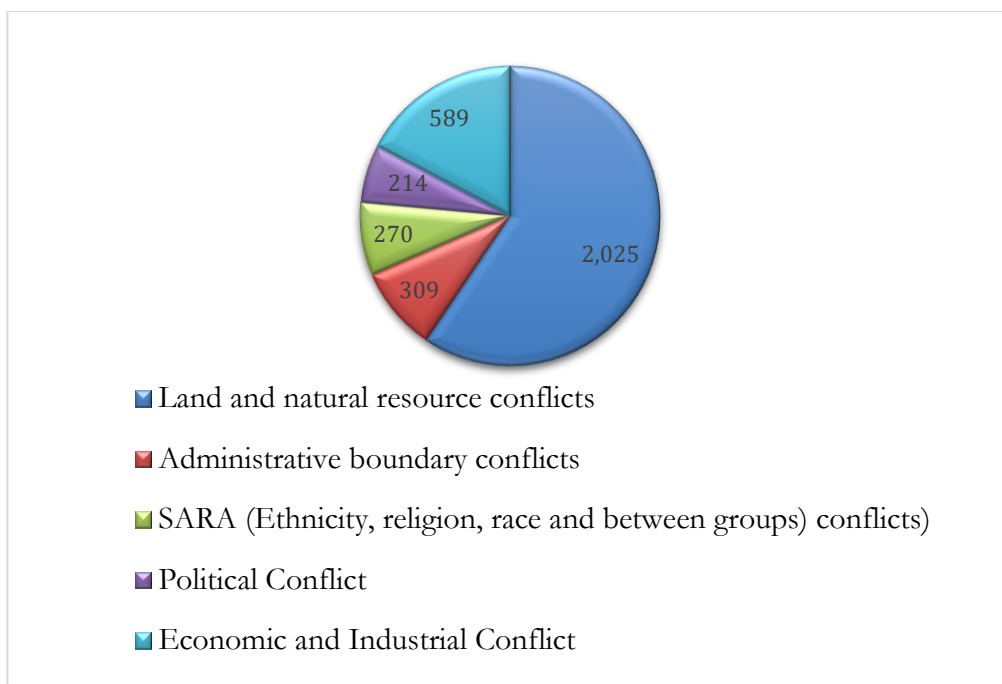


Figure 1. Number of Conflicts in Jambi Province Throughout 2010-2021

The Figure 1 shows that Throughout 2010–2021, there were 3,408 conflicts recorded in Jambi Province, consisting of 59.45% land and natural resource conflicts, 9.07% administrative boundary conflicts, 7.92% SARA (religious, ethnic, racial, inter-group) conflicts, 6.28% political conflicts and 17.28% economic and industrial conflicts (Yuliana, 2025). This shows that Jambi Province is not only a source of wealth but also a source of conflict, particularly in the context of SARA (ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup)-based conflicts. Jambi Province is facing a number of cases that illustrate A serious challenge in maintaining harmony and harmony between religious communities is the issue of intolerance that is developing in the region. The recent emergence of several cases of intolerance indicates that interfaith harmony in this region remains fragile and requires attention. According to the 2024 Interfaith Harmony Index (IKUB) report released by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, significant variation between provinces in terms of harmony levels is evident. At the nation level, the IKUB score is 76.47 which is considered quite high. However, there are several provinces in Indonesia that have scores below the national average and are included in the lowest category.. One of the provinces with the lowest score is Jambi provinces with a total score of 69.24. (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). See Figure 2

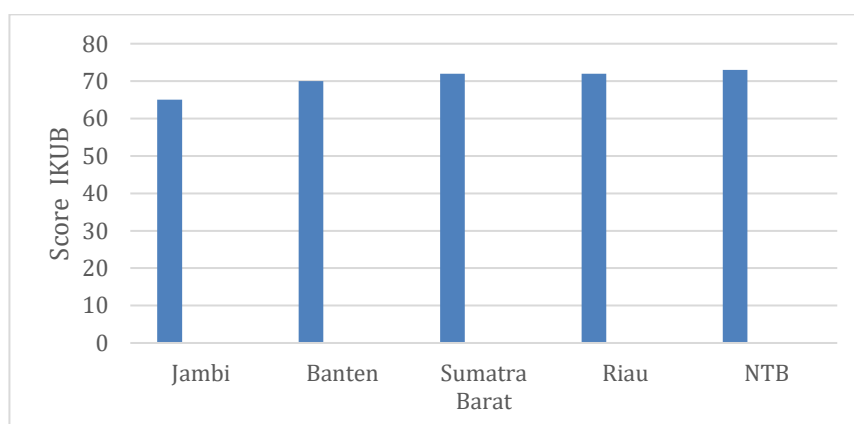


Figure 2. Interfaith Harmony Index Score in 2024

Source: Research and Development Agency of the Ministry of Religion 2024

Based on inter-religious harmony index (IKUB) data released by the Ministry of Religion in the picture above, it is stated that Jambi Province has the lowest score, namely fifth in Indonesia. Furthermore, this ranking also shows that cases of tolerance and inter-religious relations in Jambi still face significant challenges. This low index reflects fundamental problems, such as low acceptance of differences in beliefs between religious communities or discrimination, problems with licensing places of worship, and limited space for effective inter-religious dialogue. This condition also cannot be separated from local social and political dynamics, where political, economic and identity interests are often interrelated, thereby strengthening the potential for cases of intolerance.

In the Jambi community, the issue of intolerance in Jambi Province in the last 5 years has not had a very wide impact, but they revealed that there were cases of intolerance in Jambi related to the sealing of several churches in Jambi Province.

" Looking at the conditions in Jambi Province over the past five years, there has been relatively no conflict, let alone physical contact. However, in the past five years, there have been several issues related to the sealing of several churches in Jambi Province. In this regard, we, as a forum, have taken steps to engage in dialogue with the community. We are also conducting outreach and mediation to mitigate the conflict so it doesn't escalate." (Wahyudi, interview, October 2025).

Based on the data above, although Jambi Province has enjoyed a relatively conducive social climate with no physical conflict in the past five years, the potential for intolerance still arises in the form of non-violent issues, such as the accession of certain places of worship. This situation show that conflict in Jambi Province is not always devoid of open violence indicates that conflict in Jambi does not always manifest as overt violence, but more often manifests as social and administrative tensions related to freedom between religious communities.

Various cases that have occurred in recent years show that religious life in Jambi is not completely free from social conflict, especially regarding the issue of establishing places of worship. The most prominent case involved three churches in RT 07, Kenali Besar Subdistrict, Alam Barajo District, Jambi City, in 2018. The three churches that were sealed by the local government were the Indonesian Methodist Church (GMI), the Assemblies of God Church (GSJA), and the Indonesian Christian Church (HKI). The sealing was carried out because the buildings were deemed not to have met the administrative requirements as stipulated in Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Minister of Home Affairs No. 9 and 8 of 2006 concerning the establishment of houses of worship (Firdaus et al., 2023).

On the other hand, the community considers that this action is unfair because they have been worshipping for years without any obstacles. This case then sparked conflict in society because it was deemed to violate citizens' constitutional rights to worship according to their beliefs, as guaranteed in Article 29 of the 1945 Constitution (Sidin, 2019). This conflict is similar to what occurred at the Canaan Methodist Church in Jambi City, where the church has been used by the congregation for worship for more than 18 years. The Jambi City Government initially planned to close the church on the grounds of violating building regulations and general violations. The congregation rejected this action because they felt that the previous licensing process was not transparent and fair. This incident shows that religious conflict in Jambi is not always triggered by differences in beliefs, but also due to unclear regulations and weak communication between the government, religious leaders and local communities. These conflicts do not always lead to violence, but instead give rise to social tensions that have the potential to damage inter-religious relations

Not only that, in Jambi Province, specifically in the PT Wira Karya Sakti (WKS) area in East Tanjung Jabung Regency, socio-religious conflict also emerged when a group of Catholics who worked for the company were denied access to public facilities for worship. This rejection stems from a misunderstanding and lack of communication between the local community and the migrant workers, most of whom are Catholic. The problem of cases of intolerance and social conflict in Jambi Province reflects the dynamics of a pluralistic society which still faces challenges in achieving harmony. Although the social situation in Jambi is generally relatively conducive and physical conflicts rarely occur, problems

such as the closure of places of worship, differences in views between religious groups, and tensions related to social identity show that the potential for intolerance is still quite strong.

3.2 Politicization of Religion in Electoral Democracy in Jambi Province

In the social and political life of Jambi Province, religious conflicts are closely linked to the democratic process, particularly in regional head elections (Pilkada) and general elections (Pemilu). Religious issues are often used by candidates or elite groups as a strategy to garner political support, a practice known as the politicization of religion. In Indonesia's electoral democracy, religious issues are often used as political instruments by certain actors to gain mass support. This politicization of religion frequently triggers tension and even leads to social conflict (Widjaja et al., 2024). Data from the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace shows that throughout 2024, 260 incidents with 402 acts of violation of religious freedom were recorded, and most of these occurred in the years leading up to elections or. This pattern shows that political momentum often triggers the emergence of intolerant acts.

Religion is often seen as a source of moral values that provide an ethical foundation for political practice. However, on the other hand, religion is also often used as a tool to mobilize political support, which in some cases can actually trigger social tensions in society. Various survey results show that the influence of religion on the political choices of Indonesians remains very strong. Data from the Indonesian Survey Institute reveals that around 74% of Indonesian citizens consider religious factors when determining their political choices. Meanwhile, the results of the study Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting show that around 40% of Muslim voters select candidates based on shared religious identity. This finding confirms that religion in Indonesia plays a role not only in personal life but also has a significant influence on the dynamics and competition of national politics.

Based on these data, it shows that the socio-political conditions in Jambi Province require serious attention. This is because the dynamics of intolerance and social conflict that arise not only have an impact on relations between diverse religions, but also have the potential to disrupting regional political stability and destroying harmonious social order. A concrete case of the politicization of religion occurred in Seberang Kota Jambi, where religion was used as a tool to gain political power and support. At various political moments, religious symbols and activities were often used as campaign strategies to attract the masses, so that religion no longer functioned as a moral guide but as a pragmatic political instrument. Because the Seberang Kota Jambi community is predominantly Muslim, it is understandable that the Islamic dimension is often used as a political tool to attract mass support (Gunawan, 2020).

In the Simultaneous Election Monitoring Report published by the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) in 2020, Jambi Province was listed as one of the regions that has a high level of vulnerability to negative campaign activities that contain elements of ethnicity, religion, race and inter-group relations (SARA). This phenomenon shows that political contestation in Jambi is vulnerable to exploitation by certain groups to raise identity issues as a political strategy to gain power. These SARA issues are deliberately packaged in provocative narratives that can trigger social tensions, divide society, and support the substance of democracy, which must be based on competition of ideas and work programs. This condition reflects that regional head elections are not merely a political competition, but also a stake in the values of diversity and harmony among citizens (Hafidz et al., 2021).

Table I. Vulnerability Index for the 2024 Regional Elections

Area	IKP Score	Category
Jambi City	22.3	High Risk
Sarolangun Regency	26.05	High Risk
West Tanjung Jabung Regency	20.73	Moderate Risk
Merangin Regency	15.19	Moderate Risk
Batanghari Regency	15	Moderate Risk
Tebo Regency	10	Moderate Risk
Muaro Jambi Regency	6.91	Moderate Risk
Full River City	6.51	Moderate Risk

Kerinci Regency	6.32	Moderate Risk
East Tanjung Jabung Regency	6.32	Moderate Risk
Bungo Regency	2.3	Low Risk

Based on the mapping carried out by the Jambi Province Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), the Table 1 shows that there are 11 regions categorized as vulnerable in the implementation of the 2024 Regional Elections (Almunanda, 2024). Based on the vulnerability index, it states that the index not only assesses security aspects but also the potential for socio-political conflicts that occur. This high level of vulnerability is also inseparable from social dynamics, including the politicization of religion and the issue of SARA (ethnicity, religion, race and inter-group relations) which are used as political tools in campaigns in Jambi Province, especially in Jambi City and Sarolangun Regency as well as other vulnerable areas. One such case is the campaign violation case involving mayoral candidate number 02. H. Abdul Rahman (HAR) in 2024 in Jambi City clearly demonstrated how the politicization of religion continues to be a crucial phenomenon in local political contestation. The Jambi City Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) found an administrative violation, namely the conduct of campaigning in a place of worship, namely a Chinese temple, which is legally prohibited by Law Number 7 of 2017 concerning Elections and the General Elections Commission (KPU) regulations, which strictly stipulate that political activities may not be conducted in sacred religious spaces.

Not only that, Indications of campaign violations involving ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (SARA) in Jambi Province also occurred in Kerinci Regency, during one of the campaign activities leading up to the 2024 Regional Head Elections (Jambi Link, 2024) an orator who supports one of the candidate pairs is known to have used religious attributes and symbols when giving a speech in front of the public. He appeared wearing clothes resembling a religious figure and delivered an appeal to the public with sentences containing provocative elements, such as saying that people who do not vote for a particular candidate are "not of the same faith" or "side with the devil". The incident was then officially reported to the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) of Kerinci Regency, because it was deemed to contain elements of a violation of Article 280 Paragraph (1) letter c and Law Number 7 of 2017 concerning General Elections (Constitutional Court, 2017). This article states that campaign participants, campaign teams and their supporters are strictly prohibited from carrying out insults, provocations or hate speech that could offend ethnicity, religion, race and inter-group relations (SARA).

Meanwhile, the phenomenon of politicization of religion that occurs in Jambi Province reflects serious challenges in maintaining a balance between religious life and local political dynamics. In recent years, religious issues have often been exploited by several political actors to gain mass support, build a moral image, or even weaken political opponents. This politicization of religion has led to the obscuration of religion which should be used as a source of values, ethics and humanity, but instead has become a tool of political power that is full of elite interests. The impact not only creates social polarization in society but also weakens social cohesion and trust between religious groups at the local level.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

4.1 Conclusion

In Jambi province, it is related to the context of socio-political conflict, the issue of intolerance related to permits for places of worship is one of the issues that often causes tension between religious groups. This not only undermines religious freedom, but also increases the potential for conflict and intolerance in society. The socio-political conflict in Jambi Province is closely related to the ongoing electoral democracy process in the region. In a number of regional elections and general elections (Pilkada), religious issues are often used by candidates and political groups as a strategy to gain support. This problem not only exacerbates religious conflict but also threatens social and political harmony and stability

This research has limitations. First, data on cases of intolerance and socio-political conflict in Jambi Province still relies heavily on secondary sources such as media reports, government agency data, and also limited interview results. Therefore, this report cannot fully describe the dynamics of hidden or not formally documented conflicts. Second, the scope of this study is limited to certain areas in Jambi, so the

results of the analysis cannot represent the conditions of all districts or cities. Third, because this research uses a descriptive qualitative approach, the results cannot be broadly generalized but only provide an in-depth understanding of a particular social context. In addition, the sensitivity of religious and political issues causes some informants to be reluctant to provide data openly, thereby potentially causing information bias in the interpretation of research results.

4.2 Suggestion

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be given to strengthen tolerance and prevent social conflict in Jambi Province. First, campaigns need to be carried out related to the importance of public awareness regarding the right to freedom of religion and the importance of respecting diversity needs to be strengthened, especially in areas that have a history of conflict or resistance to the construction of places of worship. This effort can be carried out through collaboration between local governments, the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), community leaders and educational institutions. This is important to do so that the licensing process does not become a source of tension between religious communities or between the community and the government. By increasing people's understanding of the values of tolerance and coexistence, the potential for friction can be minimized from an early age. Second, supervision of the politicization of religious issues, especially regarding licensing of places of worship during political moments such as regional elections and general elections, needs to be strengthened.

Ethical Approval

Not Applicable

Informed Consent Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

MGS contributed to data collection, field observation, in-depth interviews, and initial drafting of the manuscript. M contributed to research conceptualization, theoretical framework development, and supervision of the research process. HAM contributed to data analysis, interpretation of findings, and revision of the manuscript for academic clarity.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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