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by Perdian Tumanan

Fears, Hoax, and The Politics of Identity

Perdian Tumanan

Despite United States President Donald Trump's harsh comments regarding immigrants, people of color and women, 81 percent of white conservative evangelical Christians voted for him in the 2016 US presidential election. This reality has surprised many since the evangelical group is well known for its high ethical and moral standards. The American historian John Fea, who this year published *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*, stated three main elements that caused this anomaly to happen.

First and foremost, it is fear. The previous administration of Barack Obama, which had shown its inclination to progressive worldviews such as same-sex marriage, had intensified fear among American conservatives. Second, Republican politicians successfully capitalized on this fear to consolidate themselves and eventually gained political power. Third, morality issues contradicting evangelical convictions and doctrinal statements (abortion, gender minorities issues, etc.) has led conservatives to feel nostalgic about a "golden age" of Christianity. It includes the belief that America was founded as a Christian nation and must therefore remain a Christian nation, through power and political control.

Thus politics in this context is no longer a deliberate intention and effort to bring about common good, and justice for all is no longer its long-term goal. Fears and identity crises have transformed politics into merely a means to defend a particular identity and a weapon for a new cultural war.

Mary Kaldor of the London School of Economic and Political Science, in her 2012 book, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era,* prophetically said that after the Cold War, a new kind of war is emerging. The objective of this war is to control people mainly by gaining sympathy and imposing fears. Fears then become the prime mover and *raison d'être* behind every political and cultural change.

This situation has been attributed to globalization or "the advancement of interconnectedness" in every sector like the economy, education, politics, government and even in the state-military organization. The hierarchical classical, traditional form of society with all its boundaries and exclusivities becomes irrelevant in the face of international and transnational collaboration.

In particular, the capacity and role of the state's militaries have been weakened as a result of increasing military cooperation. That is why the number of interstate wars has become meager in the past 15 years, according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, a data collection project on organized violence under the Uppsala University in Sweden.

This reality makes borders blurry; values become relative, and religious beliefs become normative. Some may gladly say this situation has created a better "world without walls", and that we are citizens of the world. However many have felt marginalized and unconsciously regard themselves as losers, leading to fears and insecurity.

Similarly in Indonesia, we have witnessed the increasing use of religious language and symbols and other identity-based issues during election campaigns particularly for the last two years. Pragmatic politicians are gaining control over the anxiety and fears of Indonesians through hoaxes that are easily trusted, quickly spread and are massively divisive. This situation could trigger violence.

The burning of at least six temples in Tanjung Balai, North Sumatra in 2016 still retains tension until today. The alleged complaint from a Chinese-Buddhist woman about the volume of a mosque loudspeaker in front of her house had been distorted on social media. Hundreds of people were provoked to burn temples, believing she had said the mosque should not air the azan (call to prayer).

The fact that the woman was a double minority, both Chinese and Buddhist, had further incited the crowds. As Dutch colonial rulers had determined the Chinese as main players in the economy, a perception lingers that they are still given special privileges. A sense of injustice was probably behind the vandalism of the temples.

Similarly, the office of the Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation also witnessed violence one year ago with disruption of talks on the 1965 bloodshed blamed on a failed coup, allegedly by communists close to China.

Toward the 2019 political year, the solution to such ugly incidents is not just about policies and controls over the internet and social media.

Only real social encounters between people from different backgrounds and identities could dissipate fears, anxieties and negative perceptions.

Since Indonesians are actually used to living together in a plural setting, and have been for a long time, much local wisdom could be revived as part of the solution at the community level.

Communal traditions to improve harmonious relations with neighbors of different backgrounds include *pela gandong* in Maluku, *sintuwu maroso* in Poso, Central Sulawesi, *cidayu* (Cina-Dayak-Melayu) in West Kalimantan, *sipakatau* in South Sulawesi, the *gentenan* tradition in the Tengger community in Malang, East Java and *menyama braya* in Bali just to name a few.

The government and civil society need to revive such local wisdom.

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