



MULTICULTURAL DYNAMICS IN THE ELECTION OF A NON-MUSLIM VILLAGE HEAD IN A MUSLIM-MAJORITY COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY IN PERGUROAN VILLAGE, BANGUN PURBA SUBDISTRICT, DELI SERDANG REGENCY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the multicultural dynamics that emerge in the election process of a non-Muslim village head within a Muslim-majority community, using a case study of Perguroan Village, Bangun Purba Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency. The main focus of this research is to explore how social interactions, tolerance, and local democratic practices are carried out in a context of religious diversity that holds the potential for tension. The research employs a qualitative approach, with data collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that, despite the potential for resistance based on religious identity, the community of Perguroan Village exhibits a high level of acceptance toward a non-Muslim village head. This is made possible by the strong presence of local values such as gotong royong (mutual cooperation), respect for differences, and a long-standing history of interfaith coexistence. This study affirms that multicultural practices at the local level can function harmoniously when supported by an inclusive culture and leadership that is capable of bridging differences.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The educational process is inseparable from the social structure and the development of society, including in the case of multicultural education. Multicultural education is a relatively new phenomenon in the educational landscape, making it an appealing subject for discussion in academic forums such as seminars, workshops, symposiums, and similar events. This article presents the process and long journey of the development of multicultural education in Indonesia. The author employs two approaches to analyze the evolution of multicultural education in Indonesia: the synchronic approach and the diachronic approach. Through the synchronic approach, it is found that multicultural education in Indonesia emerged from a long historical trajectory divided into three phases: the segregation phase during the colonial era, the melting pot-oriented education phase during the New Order period, and the multicultural education phase characterized by democratic spirit during the Reformation era (Nurcahyono, 2018).

Meanwhile, the diachronic analysis reveals that the current multicultural education in Indonesia is inseparable from its historical roots. This includes the motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) as a cultural-political principle during the Majapahit Kingdom era and the reform era that gave birth to democracy, which upholds the principle of equal rights for all citizens, particularly in accessing education. Indonesia is known

as a pluralistic nation, composed of various ethnicities, religions, races, and cultures. This diversity serves both as a source of national wealth and a challenge in the context of nation-building. In the context of village governance, such diversity often manifests in local political processes, such as village head elections (*pilkades*), where religious and ethnic identities may influence voters' preferences. Perguroan Village, located in Bangun Purba Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency, is predominantly Muslim. However, at one point, the villagers elected a village head from a non-Muslim minority background. This phenomenon is intriguing and worthy of scholarly investigation, as it reflects how rural communities engage with identity differences within local democratic processes. In many other regions, religious issues often become sources of polarization or even conflict. However, the situation in Perguroan Village reflects a different dynamic (Muqoyyidin, 1970)

This study aims to explore in depth how the people of Perguroan Village construct social and political relationships in a multicultural context, particularly regarding the acceptance of leaders from religious minority groups. Additionally, this research seeks to identify the factors that facilitate religious harmony in both social and political life at the village level. Using a qualitative approach, this study will explore public perceptions, the roles of religious and customary leaders, and the local values that contribute to fostering an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance. The findings are expected to contribute to the discourse on local democracy and the strengthening of multiculturalism in Indonesia (Widowati, 2020)

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study method. This approach was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural dynamics involved in the election of a non-Muslim village head within a predominantly Muslim community. The case study of Perguroan Village was selected because it presents a unique and relevant phenomenon within the context of multiculturalism and local democracy (Sugiyono, 2020)

Research Location and Subjects

The research was conducted in Perguroan Village, Bangun Purba Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra. The research subjects include local villagers, community leaders, religious leaders (both Muslim and non-Muslim), members of the village head election committee, and the elected village head. Key informants involved are Mr. Muslim (head of the *kenaziran* board of Al-Amin Mosque), Mrs. Maila Nasution (leader of the women's prayer group), Mr. Replita Munthe (community leader and head of the hamlet), and Mr. Anton Sembiring (the elected village head of Perguroan Village, Bangun Purba Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency).

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using several techniques, namely:

1. In-depth interviews: Conducted directly with Mr. Muslim (head of the *kenaziran* board of Al-Amin Mosque), Mrs. Maila Nasution (leader of the women's prayer group), Mr. Replita Munthe (community figure and hamlet head), and Mr. Anton Sembiring (elected village head of Perguroan Village, Bangun Purba Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency).
2. Participant observation: The researcher was directly involved in community activities to observe social interactions, cultural symbols, and communication dynamics among residents. The researcher was present during the village election event in 2020 and participated as a voter from the local Muslim community.
3. Document study: This involved examining official documents such as election reports, demographic data, village archives, and news articles from local media related to the village head election. The researcher also compiled a list of interviewees as part of the research appendix.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the following steps: Data reduction: Filtering data relevant to the research focus. Data presentation: Categorizing data into key themes such as tolerance, political participation, and social acceptance. Conclusion drawing: Formulating findings from data interpretation and systematically organizing them to address the research questions (Dr. J.R. Raco, M.E., 2010)

Data Validity

To ensure data validity, the study employed source and method triangulation, namely by comparing information from various informants and using multiple data collection techniques. Additionally, member checks were conducted to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's data interpretation. Validation testing will be carried out upon completion of the field research conducted in Perguroan Village, Bangun Purba Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency (Sugiyono, 2020)

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Multiculturalism is a perspective and social policy that recognizes and appreciates cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity within a society. In the context of village life, such as in Perguroan Village, multiculturalism is reflected in the daily interactions among residents from different backgrounds who live together peacefully. Religious moderation becomes a key element in maintaining harmony within a multicultural society. This concept emphasizes a non-extremist religious attitude, respect for differences, and the promotion of tolerance and justice. Communities that embrace religious moderation are able to perceive religious differences as social assets rather than threats (Ramdhan, 2019)

In village head elections, religious moderation plays an essential role in mitigating identity politics based on religion. When communities prioritize inclusive religious values and understand that leadership is judged not solely by religious affiliation but by integrity and capability, local democracy can function in a healthy manner. This serves as an indicator of the successful implementation of multiculturalism in alignment with national values and unity (Kusumawijayanti, 2022).

Perguroan Village is a community where the majority of residents are Muslim, while the most recently elected village head belongs to a non-Muslim (Christian) religious group. In this context, the village demonstrates a multicultural social structure with ethnic backgrounds including Batak, Javanese, and Malay, and religious affiliations comprising Islam, Protestant Christianity, and Catholicism. Observations and interviews reveal that the people of Perguroan Village exhibit a relatively high level of tolerance. Interreligious relations tend to be harmonious, with normal social interactions occurring in daily life, such as during communal work (*gotong royong*), religious celebrations, and village decision-making processes.

Perguroan Village, located in Bangun Purba Subdistrict, is one of 21 villages in the subdistrict within Deli Serdang Regency. The majority of its population work as entrepreneurs and farmers. It is also a village with a predominantly Muslim population. Based on the most recent data from the village office, approximately 82% of the population is Muslim, while the rest consists of Protestant Christians, Catholics, and followers of other religions. Despite being Muslim-majority, Perguroan Village is characterized by a pluralistic society in terms of both ethnicity (including Javanese, Batak, Mandailing, and others) and religion.

Multicultural Dynamics in the Election Process

1. Nomination Process of a Non-Muslim Village Head

The most recent village head election in Perguroan Village presented a unique dynamic. A Christian candidate named Anton Sembiring successfully nominated himself and even won the election. His candidacy initially sparked discussions within the community, particularly concerning religious identity and representation. However, based on interviews with community and religious leaders, the nomination did not result in significant conflict. This was due to several key factors:

- a. **Candidate's Performance:** The non-Muslim candidate was known to be active in village social activities and maintained good relationships with residents of different faiths.
- b. **Cultural Approach:** The candidate demonstrated an ability to accommodate local values and respect the customs of the Muslim community, including participation in religious and social events.
- c. **Inclusive Leadership:** Although he had never held a position in the village office before, the candidate was perceived as a fair and inclusive leader.

2. Response of the Muslim Community

In general, the Muslim community of Perguroan Village, Bangun Purba Subdistrict, showed a relatively open-minded attitude. Interviews with religious and community leaders indicated that the election was primarily based on personal integrity and capacity rather than religious affiliation. Nevertheless, there were some small groups who questioned the appropriateness of a non-Muslim leading a Muslim-majority village. However, this concern did not escalate into a major issue, for several reasons: Religious and traditional leaders played a key role in promoting unity. Discussions were conducted through consensus forums, which reinforced local democratic values. A closed-door meeting was held between the village head candidate and the local residents to foster mutual understanding.

However, it cannot be denied that certain members of the Muslim community responded to the candidacy and victory of the non-Muslim village head with doubt and concern. They questioned the extent to which a non-Muslim leader could safeguard the interests of the Muslim community, particularly in terms of social and religious policy at the village level. These concerns were especially raised by more conservative religious groups, although they were not openly expressed in formal forums. Nevertheless, these doubts did not escalate into direct rejection, as a dialogic approach and assurances from the elected village head helped ease tensions. As expressed by Mrs. Maila Nasution, the head of the women's prayer group in Perguroan Village:

"If you ask about the history of leadership in our village, even though Muslims are the 60%, while non-Muslims are 40%, it's not unusual for a non-Muslim to be elected as village head. In my lifetime, I remember at least four non-Muslim village heads being elected," she said.

On the other hand, a small portion of residents exhibited passive resistance. They chose not to participate in the village's political processes, including abstaining from voting or refraining from attending village events after the election. However, this behavior was more individual and silent in nature, not expressed as a collective protest or movement.

3. Challenges and Potential Conflicts

Although the election of a non-Muslim village head in Perguroan Village proceeded relatively peacefully without open conflict, several challenges and potential conflicts should be taken seriously. These are closely related to religious identity, perceptions of leadership, and evolving socio-political dynamics.

a. SARA Issues and Identity Polarization

One major challenge facing Perguroan Village is the potential emergence of SARA-related issues (ethnic, religious, racial, and inter-group tensions) in local political processes. Although such tensions did not escalate in this particular election, some respondents noted that certain parties attempted to manipulate religious sentiments to influence voters. If not addressed wisely, such efforts could lead to polarization within the community. This polarization may not only occur between Muslims and non-Muslims but also within the Muslim community itself—between those with moderate views and those with more conservative perspectives. These tensions could intensify, particularly during future elections or if village policies are perceived as biased.

b. Lack of Interfaith Dialogue Forums

Despite generally peaceful coexistence, Perguroan Village currently lacks an official forum or institution for interfaith dialogue at the village level. The absence of such communication platforms hinders the development of shared understanding and the early resolution of misunderstandings or symbolic tensions—such as those involving religious celebrations, the use of public facilities, or village policies touching on identity sensitivities. Interviews also revealed expressions of social inequality voiced through religious narratives. Some residents felt that certain groups benefited more from village development or access to social assistance. Without transparent clarification, these disparities risk being amplified by religious sentiment, potentially leading to broader social conflict.

As illustrated in a dialogue with Mr. Muslim, a leader of the Al-Amin Mosque Board (BKM):

"When it comes to organizing Islamic celebrations, the process takes longer because it's hard to meet with the village head to discuss things. But for events like the Independence Day celebration on August 17, budget for music performances is quickly approved," he explained. "One time, the village head wanted to give a speech during an event held at the mosque, and we were confused about how to seat him appropriately," he added.

These challenges indicate that current tolerance practices in the village are largely **functional**, emerging out of shared needs and social harmony, but not yet fully institutionalized. Without strengthening social institutions that ensure diversity and fairness, the potential for conflict remains—especially if provoked by insensitive policies or divisive rhetoric.

Referring to **Bhikhu Parekh's theory of multiculturalism**, a truly multicultural society is one where individuals not only coexist but also mutually acknowledge and respect differences. The case study of Perguroan Village shows that the community has developed a form of **active tolerance**, demonstrated by their acceptance of a leader from a different religious background.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus can also help explain how inclusive values are cultivated within Perguroan's social life. The habitus of tolerance in this village has been shaped through long-term social interactions among diverse communities.

Factors Influencing the Case

The study on "**Multicultural Dynamics in the Election of a Non-Muslim Village Head in a Muslim-Majority Community**", as seen in the case of Perguroan Village, Bangun Purba Subdistrict, illustrates how diversity and socio-political tolerance operate at the local level. Several factors influence this dynamic, both from the community and the village head candidate's perspectives. The following are the key influencing factors:

1. Socio-Cultural Factors

In this research, Perguroan Village, Bangun Purba Subdistrict, demonstrates a harmonious relationship among religious communities. When interfaith relationships have long been established positively—as in Perguroan—the community tends to be more open to accepting candidates from different religious backgrounds. **Kinship and social proximity:** In village settings, close family or communal ties often outweigh religious differences. A non-Muslim candidate with strong social ties may still be widely accepted. **Inclusive local culture:**

Some communities uphold traditions or cultural values that honor diversity, which strengthens tolerance (Rahman, 2015)

As expressed in an interview with **Mr. Replita Munthe**, a community leader:

"We are one village here, and many of us are related by kinship. So it's not surprising that even though Mr. Anton Sembiring is non-Muslim, he was elected as village head. He also often attends traditional ceremonies as a 'sembuyak' or close community member, as we usually say."

2. Political and Leadership Factors

Reputation and integrity of the candidate. Residents often place more importance on a candidate's capability, experience, and track record than their religious identity. **Role of local elites or religious/community leaders.** Endorsement from respected Muslim figures for a non-Muslim candidate can significantly build public legitimacy.

In this regard, the researcher also interviewed **Mr. AS**, the current village head of Perguroan:

"I've been involved in village affairs for quite a while, partly because some of my family work there—especially my wife, who is the head of the village women's organization (PKK). I became interested in developing Dusun I of Perguroan Village, especially because of frequent community disputes and the ongoing difficulty in accessing clean water. These issues motivated me to run, supported by my wife, family, and local residents."

Local political dynamics (interfaith socio-political coalitions). A candidate's chances increase if they manage to build coalitions across different community groups, including the Muslim majority. From the findings in Perguroan Village, Bangun Purba Subdistrict, **Mr. RS**, the head of a hamlet, explained:

"The elected village head, Mr. Anton Sembiring, is fairly well-known in the community. His wife, Mrs. Ribka Tarigan, is the only midwife in the village. They even have a free ambulance passed down from their parents. Although Mr. Anton has no prior experience in the village office, his reputation among the people is quite good," said Mr. Replita.

Candidate's contribution to village development A candidate with a background of active involvement in community development or the local economy can be a strong choice for voters. **Economic influence in elections (money politics, patronage)** In some cases, practices such as patronage may influence election outcomes, though these are not considered ideal or normative factors (Saifulloh & Safi'i, 2017)

4. CONCLUSION

The election of a non-Muslim village head in the Muslim-majority community of Perguroan Village demonstrates that multicultural dynamics can unfold peacefully and democratically when the community prioritizes values of tolerance, openness, and candidate assessment based on capacity and integrity rather than religious background. This case study shows that despite the potential for identity-based tensions, the people of Perguroan Village have been able to foster social harmony through interfaith dialogue, community cooperation, and a shared understanding of the importance of diversity in local leadership. This reflects how multicultural awareness can serve as a strong foundation for strengthening social cohesion and democracy at the village level.

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