

# INDONESIAN CATHOLICS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

*(A Historical Perspective)*

## I. DESCRIPTION OF THE ISSUE

When in 1945 Indonesia was declared a new nation-state following centuries of Dutch and Japanese colonization, it was the intention of Sukarno, Hatta and other founding fathers that the new nation would be established as an independent democratic Republic with equal opportunities for all citizens, including members of minority religious communities. As a result, in the first years of the Republic, under the administration President Sukarno, Indonesia's minority Catholic community enjoyed religious freedom. During this time the Catholics' political participation was arguably high, even though their number was very small (Feith: 1968).

In the wake of the "1965 Tragedy"—in which a half million Indonesians suspected of being communist were massacred—Indonesian politics gradually became centralized and authoritarian, controlled by the self-declared "New Order" government of General Soeharto. This period witnessed a great number of conversions to Catholicism. Religious freedom was guaranteed, but religions were increasingly used as tools of political power (Steenbrink: 2008). Indonesian Catholics felt that they were "protected" by the government. Ironically during this period the political participation of the Catholics gradually diminished. Many Catholics tend to be apolitical, even as many churches were burned or bombed, and Christians were subjected to socio-religious tensions and conflicts.

When a democratic movement was trying to topple President Soeharto's centralized and authoritarian New Order government in the late 1990's, Indonesian Catholics' participation was rather limited, except for a few Catholic individuals. Church leaders published pastoral letters, such as the 1997 pastoral letter called *Keprihatinan dan Harapan* (Concern and Hope) but the impact outside the Catholic community was quite limited. This limited participation and contribution continue today, when on the one hand Indonesia is becoming more democratic, but on the other hand is increasingly dominated by the religious majority.

## II. PRINCIPAL QUESTIONS

Based on the above observation, we propose the following questions: As a part of the country's civil society, what role did the Indonesian Catholics play the initiation and development of democracy? With Indonesia in its infancy and the idea of democracy still new, why was the political participation of Catholics high? What factors contributed to this high political participation? Why did Catholic political participation diminish during the rule of President Soeharto (1966-1998)? What factors contributed to this diminishing political role?

Furthermore, why did political participation continue to diminish following the collapse of the Soeharto government and the move toward greater democracy? What actions are needed to enhance the role of the Indonesian Catholic community in advancing the process of democratization in Indonesia as envisioned by the country's founding fathers?

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

By using historical perspective, this research will approach the issue diachronically in order to obtain a broader view of it, including its historical roots and context. In order to do that, a series of interviews will be conducted with Indonesian Catholics who hold positions in the Church governance; Catholic scholars; Catholics who work in educational institutions; and members of the general Catholic population regarding the relationship between the Indonesian Catholic community and democracy. In addition to interviews, we will utilize existing statistical information about the Indonesian Catholic community, as well as the available literature relevant to the topic.

## IV. ANTICIPATED RESULTS

By using such approach we hope to establish why Catholic Indonesians tended to be apolitical in the struggle for democracy. Additionally we will explicate which steps should be taken in order to enhance the participation of the Catholic community in the increasing democratization of Indonesia.

## V. ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTION

With few exceptions, most publications on the Indonesian Catholic community use theological approach without solid evidence based on sociological or socio-cultural research. The five volumes of historical account edited by Martinus Muskens, *Sejarah*

*Gereja Katolik Indonesia (History of the Indonesian Catholic Church, 1973)* are monumental, but they deal mainly with documentation of the internal dynamics of the Church in Indonesia. Other similar works concentrate more on the missionary efforts in spreading the Catholic faith in the region. Not many studies have been done on the connection between the Catholic community with the broader socio-historical context of Indonesia, let alone with the dynamics of democracy in the country.

This research will illuminate the dynamics of the Catholic community in Indonesia from historical-political perspective, rather than a theological approach. It will contribute to the academic discourse on the relevance and contribution of the Catholic community to the struggle for democracy in Indonesia.

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