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Rethinking Political Moderation in Indonesia: A Critique from Chantal Mouffe's Agonistic-Pluralism Perspective

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Abstract

This article serves as a critical response to the work of Syahrain et al., which advocates for political moderation as the new foundation of Indonesian democracy. Utilizing Chantal Mouffe's framework of agonistic pluralism, this study challenges the foundational assumptions of consensus-based deliberative democracy, which is thought to restore social cohesion. The article contends that such a model of moderation can reinforce dominant power, obscure significant differences of opinion, and constrict the political participation space for opposition or minority groups. Employing a qualitative-descriptive method, the article examines the literature on democratic theory and reflects on the cases of the 2017 Jakarta regional election (Pilkada DKI) and the 2019 presidential election (Pilpres). Data were collected from academic studies, policy documents, and media reports. The findings indicate that the rhetoric of moderation, which emphasizes harmony and stability, actually diminishes the space for ideological opposition; the delegitimization and dissolution of HTI and FPI affirm this tendency. Such practices not only consolidate the hegemony of dominant power but also exacerbate inequalities in political participation. As an alternative, we propose agonistic democracy: a model that recognizes conflict and difference as prerequisites for a vibrant public sphere. Its implementation includes reforming party systems based on proportional representation, providing legal protections for minority political groups, and designing public policies that accommodate the contestation of ideas. This approach aims to balance stability with political expression, ensuring that critical voices and marginalized alternative identities are not suppressed at the national level. Thus, this article advocates for a new paradigm of Indonesian democracy that is more inclusive, equitable, and resilient to diverse identities and political visions.

Keywords: *Political Moderation; Agonistic Pluralism; Indonesian Politics; Chantal Mouffe; Critical Study*

Artikel ini merupakan respons kritis terhadap tulisan Syahrain et al. yang mengusung moderasi politik sebagai fondasi baru demokrasi Indonesia. Berbekal kerangka pluralisme agonistik Chantal Mouffe, studi ini mempertanyakan asumsi dasar demokrasi deliberatif berbasis konsensus yang diasumsikan mampu memulihkan kohesi sosial. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa model moderasi seperti itu bisa memperkuat kekuasaan yang dominan, menghilangkan perbedaan pandangan yang tajam, dan menyempitkan ruang partisipasi politik bagi kelompok oposisi atau minoritas. Melalui metode kualitatif-deskriptif, artikel ini menelaah literatur teori demokrasi dan merefleksikannya pada kasus Pilkada DKI 2017 serta Pilpres 2019. Data dihimpun dari kajian akademik, dokumen kebijakan, dan laporan media. Temuan mengindikasikan bahwa retorika moderasi, yang menekankan harmoni dan stabilitas, justru menyusutkan ruang oposisi ideologis; delegitimasi hingga pembubaran HTI dan FPI menegaskan kecenderungan ini. Praktik tersebut tidak hanya meneguhkan hegemoni kekuasaan dominan, tetapi juga menggandakan ketimpangan partisipasi politik. Sebagai alternatif, kami mengusulkan demokrasi agonistik: model yang mengakui konflik dan perbedaan sebagai prasyarat ruang publik. Implementasinya meliputi reformasi sistem kepartaian berbasis representasi proporsional, perlindungan hukum bagi kelompok politik minoritas, dan perancangan kebijakan publik yang membuka lintasan kontestasi ide. Pendekatan ini bertujuan menyeimbangkan stabilitas dan ekspresi politik tanpa menindas suara kritis serta identitas alternatif marginal di level nasional. Dengan demikian, artikel ini mendorong paradigma baru demokrasi Indonesia yang lebih inklusif, setara, dan resilien terhadap pluralitas identitas maupun visi politik.

Kata kunci: Moderasi Politik; Pluralisme Agonistik; Politik Indonesia; Chantal Mouffe; Studi Kritis

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INTRODUCTION

The article by Syahrain, Sugitanata, and Aminah, entitled "Political Moderation as a New Foundation in Indonesia: An Analysis of Deliberative Democracy Theory and Maqashid Shariah,[1]" presents a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse on democratic governance within pluralistic societies. The authors propose an integrative model that synthesizes deliberative democratic theory with the Islamic ethical framework of maqashid shariah to address the increasing political polarization in post-reform Indonesia. This synthesis is both timely and normatively persuasive. Deliberative democracy, emphasizing rational dialogue and mutual understanding, offers a framework for inclusive public reasoning. Concurrently, maqashid shariah—as articulated by contemporary Islamic scholars such as Auda (2008)—provides normative guidelines centered on justice, welfare, and the protection of rights.[2] Collectively, these frameworks seek to cultivate a political culture grounded in ethical moderation, capable of managing ideological divergence without escalating into sectarian conflict.

This article argues that the conceptual underpinnings of the political moderation model proposed by Syahrain et al. are insufficient for addressing the structural complexities and antagonistic tensions inherent in pluralistic democracies such as Indonesia. The model's emphasis on consensus, which is central to both deliberative theory and moderate political discourse, often serves as a mechanism of depoliticization by obscuring power asymmetries and marginalizing dissenting perspectives. These dynamics have become increasingly apparent in Indonesia. For example, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election was characterized by sectarian mobilization and religious identity politics, exposing profound divisions within the public sphere. Likewise, the 2019 presidential election reinforced populist binaries that polarized the electorate along ideological and religious lines. In this context, political moderation, although rhetorically presented as a unifying force, risks operating as a strategy of containment that prioritizes stability over genuine political contestation.

This article aims to critically reevaluate the paradigm of political moderation through the theoretical framework of Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism.[3] Mouffe critiques the Habermasian ideal of consensus as the ultimate goal of democratic discourse, arguing that authentic pluralism necessitates the institutionalization of conflict within democratic norms. She asserts that the pursuit of eradicating antagonism in favor of rational agreement misinterprets the nature of political

[1] Anggi Syahrain, Arif Sugitanata, and Siti Aminah, "Political Moderation as a New Foundation in Indonesia: An Analysis of Deliberative Democracy Theory and Maqashid Shariah," *An-Nida'* 48, no. 2 (2024): 1–20.

[2] Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), 2008).

[3] Chantal Mouffe, "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy," in *Political Theory in Transition* (Routledge, 2013), 113–30; Chantal Mouffe, "Agonistic Democracy and Radical Politics," *Pavilion: Journal for Politics and Culture* 29 (2014); Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?," *Social Research*, 1999, 745–58.

subjectivity and perpetuates hegemonic structures that suppress dissenting perspectives. In contrast, agonistic pluralism recognizes the legitimacy of profound ideological contestation, proposing that democracy flourishes not through the elimination of conflict but through its transformation into a non-violent struggle among legitimate adversaries. This theoretical approach is particularly relevant when analyzing Indonesia's fragmented political landscape, characterized by diverse religious, ethnic, and ideological communities competing over the nation-state's meaning and trajectory.

In contrast to prior critiques of deliberative democracy that remain predominantly theoretical, this article employs the framework of agonistic pluralism to examine the Indonesian context in a concrete manner. The risks associated with what Mouffe terms "false consensus" are clearly evident. The state-sanctioned dissolution of organizations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) illustrates how moderation can be utilized not as an inclusive middle ground but as an exclusionary mechanism of state control. Under the guise of preserving social harmony, these measures curtailed political expression and restricted democratic participation for groups considered ideologically deviant. Likewise, the enactment of the Omnibus Law in 2020—despite widespread public protests—demonstrates how elite consensus can supersede public deliberation, portraying dissent as illegitimate and obstructive.

In these instances, moderation functions as a disciplinary mechanism that reduces complex political struggles to mere technical or procedural issues. Rather than addressing conflict directly, it conceals it, thereby maintaining existing power structures. This process of depoliticization corresponds with Nancy Fraser's (1997) critique of deliberative democracy, wherein she contends that the purported neutrality of deliberation often privileges dominant discourses while marginalizing counter-publics.[4] Similarly, Iris Marion Young (2000) observes that consensus-oriented models frequently obscure the historical and structural aspects of exclusion, thus perpetuating injustice under the pretense of inclusion.[5] From this standpoint, political moderation does not resolve conflict; instead, it sanitizes it.

The Indonesian experience demonstrates that appeals for moderation have frequently coincided with the consolidation of state authority, thereby constricting the spectrum of permissible discourse within the public sphere. The marginalization of dissenting Islamic parties, the securitization of civil society, and the deployment of legal mechanisms to regulate religious expression exemplify how the notion of moderation can be instrumentalized to serve hegemonic objectives. Within this framework, moderation becomes synonymous with normalization, wherein radical critique is delegitimized as irrational, and dissent is conflated with extremism.

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[4] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing," *Democracy"." In Habermas and the Public Sphere, Edited by C. Calhoun*, 1999, 109–42.

[5] Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

The principal argument of this article is that political moderation, as conceptualized in Syahrain et al.'s model, risks oversimplifying complex political realities by endorsing a centrist stance that inadequately addresses the structural inequalities and ideological conflicts inherent in Indonesian democracy. Instead of facilitating inclusive dialogue, this form of moderation tends to prioritize stability over justice, compromise over recognition, and technocratic solutions over democratic participation. Consequently, it advances a conception of politics that is orderly yet fails to reflect the lived experiences of marginalized groups within the public sphere.

This article employs a critical-interpretive framework to analyze the political moderation model advanced by Syahrain et al., utilizing Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism as an analytical lens. Instead of providing an exhaustive empirical investigation, the study selectively focuses on pivotal episodes in Indonesia's post-reform political development—such as electoral contests, state regulatory practices, and partisan alignments—to highlight the conceptual implications of enforcing consensus politics within a pluralistic society characterized by structural inequalities and deep-seated ideological divisions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An Analysis of Political Polarization and Populism through the Lens of Chantal Mouffe's Theoretical Framework

The increase in political polarization and populism has become a defining characteristic of contemporary democracies, especially in societies marked by considerable religious, ethnic, and ideological diversity, such as Indonesia. Political polarization, commonly identified by the widening gap between opposing political ideologies, not only undermines democratic discourse but also intensifies societal tensions. Concurrently, populism—generally understood as a political strategy that contrasts "the people" with the elite emerged as a reaction to widespread disillusionment with established political institutions. In the context of Indonesia, this phenomenon is evident in the emergence of populist leaders who present their platforms as defenders of Islamic values or traditional cultural norms in opposition to a secular, often Westernized, political elite.

Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism provides a significant framework for analyzing these phenomena. In contrast to deliberative democratic theorists, who regard political conflict as an obstacle to be resolved through dialogue and consensus, Mouffe contends that conflict is an intrinsic aspect of political life that should not be entirely eliminated. Rather than perceiving polarization as a threat to democracy, Mouffe posits that conflict between adversaries constitutes a necessary element of a dynamic political environment. According to her perspective, a healthy democracy is not characterized by the absence of conflict but by the capacity for conflicting interests and ideologies to coexist in a structured and productive manner.

Mouffe differentiates between "antagonism," which denotes the destructive confrontation between enemies, and "agonism," which describes the more constructive tension between adversaries who, despite their differences, acknowledge the legitimacy of each other's right to exist and to engage in the political process. This distinction is essential for comprehending how polarization and populism can be managed rather than eradicated. According to Mouffe, the issue does not stem from the existence of polarization itself but from the inability to channel these tensions into democratic forms of contestation. When political systems attempt to suppress conflict in the pursuit of consensus, they risk intensifying divisions by marginalizing the concerns of disenfranchised groups, which populist movements often aim to represent.

The Case of the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election

An illustrative example of Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism is evident in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, which prominently featured polarization and populism. The election involved the incumbent Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), a Christian of Chinese descent, competing against Muslim challengers. The campaign was characterized by a pronounced populist narrative, including accusations of blasphemy directed at Ahok and the mobilization of Islamic identity politics. Supporters of Ahok framed the election as a test of secular democracy, whereas his opponents portrayed it as a defense of Islamic values and local traditions against perceived foreign influence.[6]

From the standpoint of deliberative democracy, this polarization is interpreted as a failure of the democratic process, characterized by both factions' unwillingness to engage in rational dialogue.[7] However, Mouffe's theoretical framework posits that this conflict embodies more profound ideological divisions within Indonesian society—divisions that resist resolution through consensus. Rather than seeking to suppress these ideological confrontations, an agonistic approach advocates for their expression within a democratic context that acknowledges and legitimizes the claims of both parties. According to Mouffe's theory, Indonesia's democratic institutions should facilitate mechanisms that enable such debates to occur without undermining the legitimacy of either side.

In this context, Mouffe presents a more balanced interpretation of political polarization and populism by acknowledging the inevitability of ideological conflicts within pluralistic societies. Her framework, which promotes democratic

[6] Subekti W Priyadharma, "Against Ahok: An Analysis of Emotion-Driven Movements and Network Power in Jakarta's 2017 Gubernatorial Election," *Salasika* 1, no. 1 (2018): 43–58; Charlotte Setijadi, *Ahok's Downfall and the Rise of Islamist Populism in Indonesia* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Singapore, 2017); Amalia Sustikarini, "Anies Baswedan and Substate Populism in Jakarta, Indonesia," in *Democratic Recession, Autocratization, and Democratic Backlash in Southeast Asia* (Springer, 2023), 63–92.

[7] Pangi Syarwi, "Diskursus Teori Dan Praktik Model Demokrasi Konsensus Di Indonesia," *Communitarian: Jurnal Prodi Ilmu Politik* 3, no. 2 (2022); Fahrul Muzaqqi, "Diskursus Demokrasi Deliberatif Di Indonesia," *JRP (Jurnal Review Politik)* 3, no. 1 (2013): 123–39.

contestation rather than the imposition of consensus, offers a means to accommodate diverse political identities without resorting to exclusion or repression. Applied to Indonesia, this approach entails recognizing the legitimate concerns of both secular and religious groups while ensuring their coexistence within a broader democratic framework.[8]

The conflict surrounding the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election underscores the profound tensions between secular and religious identities within Indonesia's developing democracy.[9] Many analysts, including advocates of deliberative democracy, interpreted the election's polarization as a deviation from rational, consensus-oriented political processes. Nevertheless, from the perspective of Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism, such polarization is not inherently detrimental. Mouffe contends that ideological conflicts are both unavoidable and vital for sustaining a dynamic democratic system. The pronounced opposition between Ahok's technocratic, secular administration and the populist, Islamically motivated opposition he encountered highlights the diverse political identities present in Indonesia. These identities resist facile reconciliation within a framework that privileges consensus at the expense of contestation.

Efforts to suppress or resolve conflicts under the guise of national unity may, in fact, prove counterproductive, resulting in increased radicalization. Mouffe highlights that the suppression of ideological conflicts often leads to their resurgence in more extreme manifestations, thereby posing a potential threat to democratic systems. In the context of Indonesia, the emergence of Islamist populism during the 2017 election can be interpreted as a reaction to the marginalization of Islamic political discourse within the secular framework of Indonesian governance.[10] By framing the election as a defense of Islamic values against secular encroachment, opponents of Ahok successfully mobilized a wide range of religious and conservative voters who felt alienated by the dominant political consensus.[11] This phenomenon exemplifies Mouffe's concept of the "return of the repressed," wherein marginalized groups do not disappear but instead seek alternative avenues for political expression.[12]

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[8] Ferdi Jehalut, "Demokrasi Agonistik Dan Spirit Baru Pasca-Pilkada," *JAP UNWIRA* 3, no. 2 (2020): 95–106.

[9] Dina Lestari, "Pilkada DKI Jakarta 2017: Dinamika Politik Identitas Di Indonesia," *JUPE: Jurnal Pendidikan Mandala* 4, no. 4 (2019): 12–16.

[10] Noorhaidi Hasan, "New Media, Post-Islamist Piety, and Cyber Islam Islamic Knowledge Production in Modern Indonesian Society," 2020; Rohit Mahatir Manese, "Gerakan Islam Pasca Orde Baru: Kelahiran FPI Dan Dampaknya," *Historia Islamica: Journal of Islamic History and Civilization* 2, no. 1 (2023): 52–63.

[11] Muhammad Radya Yudantiasa, "The Face Of Islam After The 2019 Presidential Election: Democracy And The Challenge Of Dialogue: Wajah Islam Pasca Pemilihan Presiden 2019: Demokrasi Dan Tantangan Dialog," *Dialog* 43, no. 2 (2020): 265–74.

[12] Nikolai Roskamm, "Filling the Empty Place: Laclau and Mouffe on Power and Hegemony," in *Handbook on Planning and Power* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 104–17.

From an agonistic perspective, the primary challenge facing Indonesian democracy is not the eradication of conflicts but the establishment of institutional frameworks that facilitate their debate and contestation without compromising the legitimacy of the political system. Mouffe contends that democratic institutions must be restructured to accommodate a plurality of political identities, thereby enabling ongoing contestation and negotiation without descending into violent antagonism.[13] Accordingly, Indonesia's democratic institutions should be reinforced to provide avenues for both secular and religious actors to participate in substantive political dialogue. This process would entail the creation of forums in which competing conceptions of Indonesian identity—whether grounded in religious, ethnic, or civic nationalism—can be expressed and deliberated upon without delegitimizing one another.

The 2017 election, characterized by extensive use of religious symbolism and identity politics, exemplifies the limitations of consensus-driven politics in pluralistic societies.[14] As Laclau and Mouffe argue, politics should not be understood as the pursuit of a definitive resolution to conflicts but rather as the ongoing management of differences.[15] The model of agonistic pluralism offers a conceptual framework for managing these differences in a manner that enhances democracy by channeling political energies into institutionalized forms of contestation. By acknowledging and embracing the diversity of political identities within Indonesia, instead of attempting to suppress them in favor of a singular national identity, agonistic pluralism provides a more inclusive and equitable approach to democratic governance. This approach is particularly vital in a country as diverse as Indonesia, where the coexistence of multiple religious, ethnic, and ideological groups necessitates a flexible and inclusive democratic framework.

The 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election and the "Cebong-Kampret" Political Divide

In the context of the 2019 Indonesian presidential election, the "Cebong-Kampret" divide serves as a compelling case study for examining political conflict through the lens of Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism. The polarization between supporters of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and followers of Prabowo Subianto, often dismissed in popular discourse as merely a contest of memes and social media commentary, in fact reflects a profound ideological cleavage within Indonesian society.[16] Jokowi's technocratic and development-oriented governance model contrasted sharply with Prabowo's populist and nationalist rhetoric, which

[13] Chantal Mouffe, "The Affects of Democracy," *Критика и Хуманизъм*, no. 49 (2018): 61–70.

[14] Dina Lestari, "Pilkada DKI Jakarta 2017: Dinamika Politik Identitas Di Indonesia," *JUPE: Jurnal Pendidikan Mandala* 4, no. 4 (2019): 12–16.

[15] Thomas Jacobs, "The Dislocated Universe of Laclau and Mouffe: An Introduction to Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory," *Critical Review* 30, no. 3–4 (2018): 294–315.

[16] Akhirul Aminulloh et al., "Propaganda and Political Memes on Social Media in the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election," *Journal of Islamic World and Politics* 6, no. 2 (2022): 342–65.

emphasized traditional values, economic sovereignty, and a critique of globalization.[17] These divergent political visions, articulated through polarized identities such as "Cebong" and "Kampret", exemplify the ideological contestation that Mouffe identifies as essential to democratic politics.

Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism asserts that the presence of legitimate political conflict is fundamental to a robust democracy. From this perspective, the polarization observed during the 2019 elections should not be interpreted as a failure of democratic processes; rather, it represents an opportunity to enhance democratic engagement. Scholars such as Aspinall and Berenschot have demonstrated that this polarization extends beyond ideological differences, encompassing socio-economic, religious, and regional identities, thereby underscoring the pluralistic character of political affiliations in Indonesia.[18] By permitting these diverse identities to articulate their distinct political concerns within the democratic framework, a more constructive form of political participation may develop—one that counters the risks associated with suppressing dissenting voices under the pretext of preserving national unity.

Moreover, the role of social media in intensifying political polarization during the election is essential for comprehending the depth of the Cebong-Kampret divide. Research conducted by Lim and Tapsell illustrates how platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp facilitated the dissemination of disinformation, thereby reinforcing the ideological entrenchment of these two factions.[19] This phenomenon aligns with Sunstein's concept of online echo chambers, wherein individuals are predominantly exposed to ideologically homogeneous content, which strengthens their political identities and exacerbates polarization.[20] From Mouffe's perspective, rather than striving to eliminate these conflicts through appeals for consensus, democratic institutions should aim to establish more effective mechanisms that allow these diverse groups to openly contest power and policy.

Furthermore, Prabowo's post-election protests, which culminated in widespread demonstrations by his supporters, exemplify Mouffe's argument that the suppression of political antagonism may precipitate more destructive forms of conflict. The refusal of Prabowo's faction to accept the election results, driven by

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[17] Henry T Sianipar, "Cebong Kampret: The Polarizing Election Algorithm," *Digicommtive: Jurnal of Communication Creative Studies, and Digital Culture* 2, no. 1 (2024): 16–30; Aditya Candra Lesmana and Budi Sutrisno, "Playing with Identity Politics: An Analysis Post-2019 Presidential Election," *Jurnal Sosiologi USK (Media Pemikiran & Aplikasi)* 15, no. 2 (2021): 236–54.

[18] Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot, *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

[19] Merlyna Lim, "Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 411–27; Ross Tapsell, *Indonesia's Policing of Hoax News Increasingly Politicised* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020).

[20] Matteo Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 9 (2021): e2023301118; Jiuyu Chen, "Research on the Echo Chamber Effect," in *2021 International Conference on Public Art and Human Development (ICPAHD 2021)* (Atlantis Press, 2022), 874–77.

allegations of fraud and electoral manipulation, highlights how unresolved political grievances can escalate into violence and social unrest. This case substantiates Mouffe's claim that efforts to eliminate conflict in the pursuit of stability can lead to the alienation of substantial segments of the population, as evidenced by the extensive mobilization of Prabowo's supporters following the election.[21]

To address these divisions, Mouffe advocates for the establishment of a democratic system in which adversaries are allowed to engage in open and legitimate contestation without resorting to violence or exclusionary practices. Mouffe emphasizes that this approach necessitates the recognition of the legitimacy of all political groups, not only through formal inclusion but also by permitting them to actively challenge and transform the political landscape. From this perspective, the Cebong-Kampret divide exemplifies the inherent pluralism within Indonesia's political culture, demonstrating how an agonistic democracy—one that embraces conflict rather than suppresses it—can foster a more inclusive and resilient democratic process. This viewpoint promotes the acknowledgment of ideological, regional, and religious differences as valid forms of political contestation which, when properly institutionalized, contribute to the vitality of Indonesia's democracy.[22]

It is important to recognize that agonistic pluralism has inherent limitations. In situations of intense political polarization, exemplified by the mass demonstrations following Indonesia's 2019 presidential election, there is a significant risk that unmediated contestation may escalate from agonism to destructive antagonism. Mouffe acknowledges the necessity of institutional mechanisms that can legitimize conflict; however, the Indonesian case demonstrates that when political actors no longer accept procedural legitimacy—such as electoral results or the authority of democratic institutions—democracy becomes susceptible to systemic delegitimization. Consequently, the challenge lies in designing institutions that are sufficiently flexible to accommodate radical differences while remaining resilient enough to maintain democratic cohesion, without reducing conflict to a securitized discourse aimed at suppressing radicalism.

From an institutional perspective, Mouffe's agonistic framework advocates for political reforms that enhance the inclusivity of Indonesia's democratic system with respect to ideological diversity. Such reforms may involve strengthening proportional representation, implementing affirmative measures to support minority political actors, and establishing inclusive deliberative forums at the local level that engage religious organizations, social movements, and indigenous communities. Furthermore, the state should formulate digital media policies that extend beyond the mere

[21] Abdurrachman Satrio, "A Battle between Two Populists: The 2019 Presidential Election and the Resurgence of Indonesia's Authoritarian Constitutional Tradition," *Australian Journal of Asian Law* 19, no. 2 (2019): 175–95.

[22] Hans Antlöv, Derick W Brinkerhoff, and Elke Rapp, "Civil Society Capacity Building for Democratic Reform: Experience and Lessons from Indonesia," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 21 (2010): 417–39.

mitigation of disinformation; these policies must seek to reconstruct online public spheres that facilitate the expression of diverse worldviews without succumbing to algorithmic fragmentation. In summary, agonistic pluralism can only operate effectively when underpinned by an institutional framework that regards conflict as a democratic asset rather than a threat to be eliminated.

Digital antagonism in Indonesia extends beyond a mere manifestation of ideological divisions; it is increasingly influenced by the technological design of social media platforms. As demonstrated by Tapsell (2017) and Lim (2019), platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp facilitate polarized discourse through the propagation of viral disinformation, the formation of ideological echo chambers, and the amplification of emotionally charged moral panics.[23] These dynamics hinder the potential for adversarial recognition by promoting tribalism rather than pluralism. Within the theoretical framework proposed by Mouffe, the appropriate response is not to depoliticize or censor online speech but to redesign digital platforms to enable structured contestation. Consequently, regulatory frameworks should emphasize algorithmic transparency, the promotion of cross-cutting content exposure, and the enhancement of the visibility of oppositional voices without resorting to suppression.

Furthermore, community-based digital mediation institutions have the potential to play a pivotal role in transforming online political conflicts. These entities would not serve as censors but rather as facilitators of discursive engagement by monitoring viral claims, promoting civic dialogue, and mediating antagonism into agonism. When combined with advanced digital literacy programs that extend beyond fact-checking to encompass the cultivation of civic empathy and adversarial respect, such institutions could contribute to the restructuring of the digital public sphere. Drawing upon Mouffe's concept that democracy relies on the capacity to acknowledge the legitimacy of the opponent, this model of online governance allows for the expression of conflict without descending into delegitimization. In this manner, Indonesia can cultivate a more inclusive and resilient democratic culture both offline and online.

Reconceptualizing Democracy Beyond the Constraints of Political Moderation

In contemporary political discourse, the concept of political moderation is frequently praised as a means to achieve balance and social harmony. Nevertheless, a critical analysis of this notion reveals considerable limitations, especially when applied to diverse and polarized political contexts such as Indonesia. A primary critique of political moderation concerns its propensity to overlook entrenched inequalities and injustices. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, in his examination of civic reason, contends that although dialogue and compromise are vital elements of a democratic society, they

[23] Tapsell, *Indonesia's Policing of Hoax News Increasingly Politicised*; Merlyna Lim, "Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 411–27; Chen, "Research on the Echo Chamber Effect"; Cinelli et al., "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media."

must not come at the expense of marginalized groups. Civic reason necessitates the inclusion of all groups, irrespective of their ideological orientations, in public discourse.[24] However, the prioritization of consensus often marginalizes more radical or dissenting perspectives in favor of preserving social harmony. Within the Indonesian context, where political and social cleavages are frequently influenced by ethnic, religious, and economic disparities, moderation may inadvertently perpetuate existing power structures by privileging the voices of the majority or those in authority, thereby depriving minority groups of a substantive platform.

Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism offers a critical perspective on the pursuit of consensus, positing that political conflict is not only inevitable but also essential for the proper functioning of democracy. Mouffe contends that efforts to eliminate conflict through moderation are misguided, as they fail to acknowledge the inherently pluralistic character of democratic societies. Instead of attempting to suppress or resolve political disagreements, a genuinely democratic system should facilitate a space where such conflicts can be openly expressed and deliberated. In the context of Indonesia, the pronounced polarization observed in recent elections—exemplified by the 2019 presidential contest between Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto—should not be regarded solely as a destructive phenomenon but rather as a manifestation of legitimate political contestation. By characterizing polarization as inherently detrimental, political moderation neglects the constructive role that conflict plays in challenging dominant ideologies and fostering alternative visions for the nation.

Furthermore, the emphasis on political moderation carries the risk of depoliticizing public discourse by prioritizing compromise at the expense of authentic ideological engagement. An-Naim's concept of civic reason underscores the significance of dialogue; however, he also cautions against the reduction of complex political issues to overly simplistic compromises.[25] In a society as heterogeneous as Indonesia, where matters such as economic inequality, religious identity, and regional autonomy are profoundly contested, political moderation frequently produces superficial solutions that fail to address the underlying causes of conflict. Rather than promoting substantive dialogue, political moderation may lead to the avoidance of challenging conversations, thereby hindering the development of more radical and potentially transformative responses to Indonesia's political and social issues.

The limitations of political moderation become increasingly evident when examined within a broader global context. In numerous democracies worldwide, the emergence of populism and political polarization has revealed the inadequacies of traditional consensus-based approaches. Mouffe's critique of liberal democracy

[24] Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

[25] Ah Fajruddin Fatwa, "Dekolonisasi Pemikiran Dan Efektivitas Penegakan HAM Dalam Perspektif Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim," *Al-Jinayah: Jurnal Hukum Pidana Islam* 9, no. 2 (2023): 177–94.

highlights the significance of embracing political conflict as a mechanism for challenging entrenched power structures and promoting democratic renewal.[26] For Indonesia, this entails acknowledging that political polarization should not be feared or suppressed; rather, it represents the country's dynamic and pluralistic political landscape. By embracing conflict and permitting the open expression of diverse political ideologies, Indonesia can foster a more inclusive and participatory democracy that genuinely reflects the varied interests and aspirations of its populace.

The concept of an inclusive yet conflictual society is exemplified in the recent scholarship of Robert Hefner, who contends that Indonesian society increasingly exhibits the characteristics of an agonistic community as theorized by Mouffe. Hefner argues that Indonesia's socio-political environment, characterized by its diversity and contestations, constitutes a conducive context for the emergence of an agonistic democracy, wherein diverse political and cultural groups can openly engage with their differing perspectives without necessarily descending into antagonism or destructive conflict. He further suggests that this agonistic tendency signifies Indonesia's advancing political maturity, marked by the recognition of legitimate opposition and the institutionalization of pluralism.[27] Nonetheless, while Hefner's optimistic appraisal offers a valuable framework for understanding the potential development of agonistic democracy in Indonesia, it remains essential to critically evaluate this perspective and the assumptions that underpin it.

The Argument Concerning the Weaknesses of Religious and Political Moderation

The concept of moderation, within both religious and political domains, has been extensively lauded as a mechanism for fostering societal harmony and inclusivity, particularly in contexts characterized by significant diversity, such as Indonesia.[28] Syahrain et al. contend that religious and political moderation function as complementary forces that contribute to the establishment of a peaceful society grounded in tolerance, respect for differences, and democratic principles. They argue that religious moderation mitigates extremism and promotes mutual respect, whereas political moderation ensures that democratic processes are inclusive and attentive to pluralism.[29] Nevertheless, despite the apparent appeal of these claims, they tend to obscure the inherent tensions present within democratic societies. This chapter undertakes a critical examination of the limitations associated with both religious and political moderation, drawing upon Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism,

[26] Nur Saadah Khudri, "Subjek Paradoks Dalam Politik Pluralisme Menurut Chantal Mouffe," *Jurnal Impresi Indonesia* 1, no. 6 (2022): 634–45.

[27] Robert W Hefner, *Islam and Citizenship in Indonesia: Democracy and the Quest for an Inclusive Public Ethics* (Taylor & Francis, 2023).

[28] Khalid Rahman and Aditia Muhammad Noor, *Moderasi Beragama Di Tengah Pergumulan Ideologi Ekstremisme* (Universitas Brawijaya Press, 2020).

[29] Anggi Syahrain, Arif Sugitanata, and Siti Aminah, "Political Moderation as a New Foundation in Indonesia: An Analysis of Deliberative Democracy Theory and Maqashid Shariah," *An-Nida'* 48, no. 2 (2024): 11–12.

which offers a more nuanced conceptualization of democracy that recognizes the significance of conflict and contestation.

Syahrain et al. conceptualize religious and political moderation as mutually reinforcing, positing that moderation in both domains contributes to a stronger and more cohesive democracy. They define religious moderation as the adoption of a centrist approach that eschews extremism and prioritizes shared interests over divisive differences.[30] Conversely, political moderation is characterized by the acceptance of plurality and the promotion of dialogue across political divides to sustain national unity. Although these perspectives are well-intentioned, they may overlook the inherent conflicts and power dynamics that exist within any heterogeneous society. In contrast, Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism challenges the ideal of harmony by arguing that democracy is sustained through conflict rather than consensus. According to Mouffe, democratic politics necessitates the recognition and management of opposing forces and identities, rather than their suppression in the pursuit of unity.[31]

One significant limitation in the argument presented by Syahrain et al. lies in their reliance on a consensual model of democracy, which emphasizes managing differences through compromise and moderation. This framework fails to account for the profound conflicts and power asymmetries inherent in any pluralistic society. Mouffe contends that political conflict should not be eradicated but rather redirected into agonistic engagement, wherein adversaries participate in legitimate political contestation without being perceived as enemies to be eliminated. In the Indonesian context, the state's dissolution of organizations such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) exemplifies the risks associated with an excessively consensual approach to moderation.[32] By proscribing these groups, the state has not only suppressed political opposition but also compromised democratic principles by recasting political adversaries as existential threats.

From Mouffe's perspective, the dissolution of HTI and FPI exemplifies the "antagonistic" nature of democracy, wherein opposition groups are perceived as enemies rather than legitimate political actors. Although these organizations may have challenged the state's vision of religious and political moderation, their exclusion from the political arena constitutes a failure of the democratic process. According to Mouffe, democracy must accommodate the coexistence of competing political projects and identities. By disbanding organizations such as HTI and FPI, the Indonesian state has precluded the possibility of agonistic engagement and reinforced a hegemonic political

[30] Syahrain, Sugitanata, and Aminah, 11–12.

[31] Chantal Mouffe, "Agonistic Democracy and Radical Politics," *Pavilion: Journal for Politics and Culture* 29 (2014).

[32] Ali Maksum et al., "Redefining the Islamic Defenders Front's (FPI) Identity after Its Dissolution by the Indonesian Government," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 13, no. 2 (2023): 399–426; Zulfadli Zulfadli and Taufani Taufani, "Kemunduran Demokrasi Dan Pelarangan Organisasi Islamis Di Era Pemerintahan Jokowi," *Potret Pemikiran* 26, no. 2 (2022): 117–36; Yuseptia Angretnowati and Meike Lusye Karolus, "Negara, Gerakan Islam Pasca-Fundamentalis Dan Masa Depan Demokrasi Di Indonesia: Kekuasaan Simbolik Dan Upaya Konsolidasi," *Politika* 13, no. 2 (2022): 2.

order that marginalizes dissenting voices. Furthermore, Syahrain et al.'s conceptualization of political moderation inadequately addresses these dynamics, portraying moderation as a remedy for polarization without recognizing the structural conflicts inherent in democratic contestation.

Another significant limitation in the concept of moderation, as presented by Syahrain et al., lies in its presumption that religious and political moderation inherently promote inclusivity and stability. Although moderation may mitigate the immediate outbreak of conflict, it frequently achieves this by suppressing radical or dissenting perspectives instead of incorporating them into democratic discourse. In the Indonesian context, the state's stringent approach to religious and political dissent has, at times, intensified societal divisions rather than ameliorated them. For instance, the dissolution of HTI and FPI may have temporarily reduced tensions; however, it also engendered a sense of political exclusion among their supporters, who perceive these state actions as undemocratic. Consequently, rather than cultivating a genuinely inclusive democracy, the state's measures have exacerbated antagonism among political factions and undermined the democratic principles of pluralism and freedom of expression.

Mouffe's critique of liberal democracy is particularly pertinent in this context. She contends that liberal democratic systems frequently fail to recognize the existence of profound societal disagreements, instead favoring consensus-building processes that obscure underlying power dynamics. The emphasis on moderation by Syahrain et al. reflects this liberal democratic inclination to prioritize consensus over conflict. However, as Mouffe argues, such an approach ultimately undermines democracy by marginalizing dissenting perspectives and perpetuating existing power structures. For democracy to operate effectively, it must accommodate the expression of radical differences and promote agonistic debate, wherein adversaries engage in conflict without resorting to violence or exclusion.[33]

More concerningly, the discourse of moderation has been extended beyond political Islam to suppress a wider range of minority expressions. A prominent example of this is the state and societal hostility directed toward adherents of local and indigenous religions—commonly known as penghayat kepercayaan—as well as members of minority sects such as the Ahmadiyah and Shia communities. Despite constitutional protections, these groups frequently encounter bureaucratic discrimination, surveillance, and limitations on their religious practices. The very institutions that advocate for religious moderation often uphold a restrictive orthodoxy that delegitimizes beliefs perceived as "deviant." This indicates that moderation does not necessarily foster an inclusive environment; rather, it often establishes boundaries of acceptability by criminalizing heterodox views. In Mouffe's framework, this

[33] Hasrul Hanif, "Antagonisme Sosial, Diskonsensus, Dan Rantai Ekuivalensi: Menegaskan Kembali Urgensi Model Demokrasi Agonistik," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik* 11, no. 1 (2007): 119–36.

represents not the regulation of agonistic plurality but the hegemonic suppression of radical difference.

Nancy Fraser's critique of deliberative democracy highlights how the purported neutrality of moderation can serve to perpetuate existing power hierarchies. Fraser contends that deliberative processes frequently privilege dominant voices while marginalizing those of less powerful groups.[34] This critique is especially relevant in the Indonesian context, where political moderation has often been utilized to manage conflicts without addressing the underlying power disparities. For example, the Indonesian government's approach to the conflict in Papua demonstrates how moderation efforts may neglect the prevailing power dynamics. Despite multiple attempts to mediate and incorporate Papuan concerns, these solutions frequently fail to confront fundamental issues related to autonomy and indigenous rights, thereby leaving the power relations between the central government and Papuan communities largely unchanged. Consequently, this sustains a status quo in which marginalized groups remain excluded from substantive political participation.[35]

Chantal Mouffe's Concept of Agonistic Pluralism: Conflict as a Form of Democratic Engagement

Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism fundamentally challenges the liberal-democratic ideal that consensus constitutes the ultimate objective of democratic politics. While numerous democratic theorists, particularly proponents of deliberative democracy such as Jürgen Habermas, emphasize rational discourse and consensus-building as the highest form of democratic practice, Mouffe contends that this approach overlooks the inherent conflicts and power dynamics intrinsic to political life. According to her perspective, politics is inherently an arena of contestation, wherein competing conceptions of the good life and societal organization come into conflict. Rather than attempting to eliminate or resolve these conflicts, Mouffe argues that democratic institutions should facilitate and manage them, enabling the expression of differences in a manner that prevents violent antagonism and promotes political engagement.

One of Mouffe's key contributions to democratic theory is her conceptual distinction between antagonism and agonism. Antagonism, as she characterizes it, denotes the relationship between enemies who fail to acknowledge the legitimacy of each other's political positions, resulting in destructive conflict. Conversely, agonism describes the relationship between adversaries who, despite holding opposing views, recognize each other's right to participate in the democratic process. Within an agonistic democracy, political actors do not aim to eliminate their opponents but rather

[34] Nancy Fraser, Adrian Bua, and Nick Vlahos, "Democracy, Participation, and Capitalist Crisis: An Interview with Nancy Fraser," *Democratic Theory* 11, no. 1 (2024): 116–28; Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing."

[35] Hipolitus Ringgi Wangge and Stephanie Lawson, "The West Papua Issue in Pacific Regional Politics: Explaining Indonesia's Foreign Policy Failure," *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 1 (2023): 61–89.

engage in a dynamic contestation over power and policy, acknowledging that such conflict constitutes an essential aspect of democratic life.[36]

Mouffe contends that a fundamental shortcoming of liberal-democratic regimes lies in their endeavor to eradicate antagonism in favor of rational consensus. This approach frequently leads to the suppression of legitimate political grievances, especially those of marginalized groups who may experience exclusion from the political process. In such circumstances, the lack of institutional avenues for expressing conflict within democratic frameworks can precipitate the emergence of more radical, anti-systemic political expressions, exemplified by the recent rise of populism in both Western and non-Western democracies.[37]

According to Mouffe, populism should not be regarded simply as a deviation from democratic norms but rather as an indication of the failure of liberal democracies to effectively accommodate the pluralism inherent in contemporary societies. In this context, populism can be understood as a form of antagonism that emerges when specific groups perceive themselves as excluded or marginalized by the political system. Populist leaders exploit this sense of exclusion by framing their rhetoric in terms of "the people" versus "the elite", thereby positioning themselves as the authentic representatives of the popular will.

Mouffe presents a nuanced perspective on populism, positing that it can assume both detrimental and beneficial roles within democratic politics. On one hand, populism may adopt an exclusionary, nationalist, or xenophobic character, thereby constituting a perilous form of antagonism that endangers the democratic order. Conversely, populism can serve as a catalyst for democratization by challenging entrenched elites and enhancing political participation through the mobilization of previously disengaged or disenfranchised groups. Thus, populism can be conceptualized as an agonistic response to the depoliticization of democratic life, reintroducing political conflict into arenas where consensus has suppressed legitimate debate.[38]

For example, the emergence of right-wing populism in Europe and the United States signifies increasing dissatisfaction with the neoliberal consensus that has prevailed in Western democracies since the late twentieth century.[39] As Mouffe contends, the neoliberal agenda, characterized by its focus on market-oriented policies and technocratic governance, has depoliticized critical aspects of public life by removing significant political decisions from democratic deliberation.[40] This process

[36] Mouffe, "Agonistic Democracy and Radical Politics"; Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?," *Social Research*, 1999, 745–58.

[37] Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, vol. 8 (Verso, 2005).

[38] Chantal Mouffe, "The Affects of Democracy," *Критика и Хуманизъм*, no. 49 (2018): 61–70.

[39] Yannis Stavrakakis et al., "Extreme Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Revisiting a Reified Association," *Critical Discourse Studies* 14, no. 4 (2017): 420–39.

[40] Chantal Mouffe, "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy," in *Political Theory in Transition* (Routledge, 2013), 113–30.

has engendered a sense of disenfranchisement among numerous voters, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, who perceive that their voices are disregarded by the political establishment. The populist movements that have arisen in response to this disenfranchisement—exemplified by Brexit in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States[41] —constitute a demand for the re-politicization of these issues and a repudiation of the technocratic consensus that has marginalized their concerns.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that the religious and political moderation advocated by Syahrain et al. risks depoliticizing conflict and silencing dissent under the guise of consensus. Drawing upon Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism, we contend that polarization and ideological contestation are not threats to democracy but rather its essential conditions. The cases of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial and 2019 presidential elections illustrate that deep societal divisions are not resolved through suppression; instead, they necessitate structured spaces for adversarial engagement. When treated as an unequivocal good, moderation can reinforce dominant norms and marginalize those who challenge them—whether they are Islamists, indigenous believers, or peripheral political actors.

Mouffe's theoretical framework provides a critical amendment to liberal-democratic ideals that excessively emphasize social harmony while neglecting underlying structural inequalities. Her conceptual distinction between antagonism and agonism demonstrates that democracy flourishes not through the elimination of conflict but by facilitating legitimate contestation among competing visions of the good life. Within the Indonesian context, policies that prioritize national unity at the expense of pluralistic contestation frequently reinforce hegemonic identities and delegitimize minority expressions, whether religious, ideological, or regional. The exclusion of groups such as HTI and FPI may yield short-term stability; however, it reveals a fundamental failure to integrate radical dissent within democratic parameters. To institutionalize agonistic democracy, Indonesia must undertake reforms of its public institutions to promote ideological pluralism and channel political conflict constructively. Such reforms include enhancing proportional representation, safeguarding minority rights within electoral legislation, and advancing civic education that cultivates adversarial respect rather than defaulting to enforced harmony. In the digital domain, ensuring algorithmic transparency and fostering participatory governance are essential to preventing polarization from escalating into tribal antagonism. Public policy should not seek to neutralize difference but rather to establish resilient democratic infrastructures wherein conflict serves as a catalyst for democratic renewal rather than a justification for exclusion.

[41] Thorsten Wojczewski, "Trump, Populism, and American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16, no. 3 (2020): 292–311.

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