

# The Role of Ethnic Identity in the Formation of Nationalism in Post-Reformation Indonesia

Saiman

Universitas Riau, Pekanbaru

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role of ethnic identity in the formation of nationalism in Indonesia in the post-Reformasi period. The 1998 Reformation opened up broader spaces for expression for various ethnic groups, thus influencing the dynamics of the relationship between local and national identities. Using a qualitative approach with descriptive methods, this study combines literature review and document analysis to answer the research findings. The results indicate that ethnic identity plays a significant role in the formation of Indonesian nationalism post-Reformasi. Freedom of expression after the collapse of the New Order allowed ethnic identities to re-emerge and be recognized as part of a multicultural Indonesia, thereby strengthening a sense of national belonging. However, this dynamic is also accompanied by challenges such as social fragmentation, identity politics, and weak internalization of the values of Pancasila, tolerance, and *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). Therefore, the formation of an inclusive nationalism requires equitable policies, strong multicultural education, and spaces for dialogue between groups to ensure that ethnic diversity becomes a unifying force, not a source of division.

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E-mail:  
[saiman.pakpahan@lecturer.unri.ac.id](mailto:saiman.pakpahan@lecturer.unri.ac.id)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 1998 Reformation marked a pivotal point in Indonesia's political history, opening up broader democratic space and providing opportunities for various local identities, including ethnic identities, to express themselves more freely in the public sphere (Putro, n.d.). This political change had a significant impact on the social and cultural dynamics of society. Previously marginalized ethnic identities now gained greater legitimacy and scope for expression, giving rise to various new phenomena in the relationship between society and the state (Handayani, 2019).

As a multicultural nation, Indonesia boasts a rich ethnic diversity. Ethnic identity is not only a cultural symbol but also a crucial part of community identity (Adha et al., 2021). In the post-Reformation context, ethnic identity has developed into a source of communal strength that plays a role in shaping solidarity and group social orientation. This situation has made ethnic identity a significant influence on national dynamics and intergroup relations (Brata, 2016).

Indonesian nationalism itself has undergone significant changes after the Reformation. While previously nationalism was more formalistic and constructed top-down by the state, post-Reformasi nationalism has become more dynamic and influenced by community participation (Supardan, 2011). Local identities have begun to play a significant role in shaping perceptions of what it means to be part of the Indonesian nation, giving rise to a more pluralistic and open concept of nationalism (Sari et al., 2022).

Amid this openness, ethnic identity can function as both an integrative force and a potential source of conflict. In many cases, ethnic identity serves as a source of pride and enriches the national identity, especially when cultural diversity is valued as part of Indonesianness (Lampe, 2014). However, under certain circumstances, ethnic identity can create friction if used as a basis for exclusivity or for specific political interests. This demonstrates the importance of understanding the role of ethnic identity in shaping nationalism (Laksono, 2001).

According to Kumbara (2008), when the dominance of the central government wavered due to the impact of the economic crisis experienced by the Indonesian nation and the pressure for national political reform, conflicts between ethnic groups and religions became prevalent in Indonesian politics. In relation to this reform, ethnic-based conflicts related to issues of uneven development and the marginalization of one ethnic group by another became a major factor. The phenomenon of nationalism in Indonesia, with all its problems, is a source of material. The phenomenon of increased ethnic cultural expression after the

Reformation is part of the democratization process that provides space for communities to negotiate their identities (Juliaستutik, 2010). Cultural celebrations, traditional festivals, ethnic-based community organizations, and the use of regional languages in public spaces are part of the community's efforts to maintain their identity. These activities not only strengthen local identities but also have the potential to enrich national identity if managed properly (Buchari, 2014).

In Indonesia's current socio-political context, the relationship between ethnic identity and nationalism is becoming increasingly relevant to study. Changes in government structure, decentralization policies, and local political dynamics influence how people interpret their national identity. This situation demands a deeper understanding of how ethnic identity functions in the formation of modern Indonesian nationalism (Sjaf, 2014).

This research seeks to describe and analyze how ethnic identity plays a role in shaping nationalism in post-Reformasi Indonesia, as well as the challenges faced. This research is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between ethnic identity and nationalism in the context of post-Reformasi Indonesia. Theoretically, this research contributes to the study of multiculturalism and nationalism. Practically, this research is expected to serve as a reference for the government, educational institutions, and community organizations in developing strategies to strengthen nationalism that respect cultural diversity and strengthen national unity.

## **Literature Review**

### **Ethnic Identity**

Ethnic identity is a concept that refers to a sense of togetherness within a group that shares a common culture, language, history, and social values. Experts such as Fredrik Barth (1998) state that ethnic identity is not only constructed through internal similarities but also through social boundaries that distinguish one group from another. Ethnic identity is dynamic and can change according to social and political contexts. In the Indonesian context, ethnic diversity is a fundamental social fact because each group possesses distinct cultural characteristics yet lives side by side within a single nation-state. Ethnic identity is not only a source of cultural pride but also the basis of social solidarity within a particular community (Fuadi, 2020).

### **Nationalism and the Concept of Nationhood**

Nationalism is an ideology that emphasizes individual loyalty and commitment to the state or nation. According to Benedict Anderson (2010), a nation is an "imagined community" defined through social construction, history, and collective narratives. Indonesian nationalism has historically been shaped by the experience of colonialism, the struggle for independence, and the values of unity formulated in the Pancasila. During the New Order era, nationalism developed through a centralistic and ideological approach, while post-Reformation nationalism has become more pluralistic, participatory, and bottom-up. This has opened up space for various local identities to contribute to shaping the meaning of nationhood.

### **The Relationship Between Ethnicity and Nationalism**

The relationship between ethnicity and nationalism is ambivalent. On the one hand, ethnic identity can strengthen nationalism when diversity is valued as part of the national identity. On the other hand, ethnic identity can trigger conflict if used for exclusive political interests. Experts state that a multiethnic state requires an integration mechanism that respects differences while maintaining unity. In the Indonesian context, the relationship between ethnic identity and nationalism is influenced by history, state policies, and regional political dynamics. Changes in government structure post-Reformation further complicate this relationship, as each region has greater room to express its ethnic identity, which ultimately influences the community's national orientation.

## **2. METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods to deeply understand how ethnic identity plays a role in the formation of nationalism in post-Reformation Indonesia. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on meanings, perspectives, and social dynamics that cannot be measured quantitatively. Data were collected through documentation studies, also used to examine government documents, scientific publications, historical archives, and other sources relevant to the research context. Data analysis was conducted using Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis technique, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and iterative drawing of conclusions (Sugiyono, 2016). Data validity was maintained through source and method triangulation. This combination of methods allows researchers to obtain a comprehensive picture of the interaction between ethnic identity and nationalism post-Reformation. With a systematic and in-depth approach, this study is expected to provide

a comprehensive understanding and describe the pattern of relationships between local and national identities in the socio-political context of contemporary Indonesia..

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **The Dynamics of the Role of Ethnic Identity in the Formation of Nationalism Post-Reformation**

##### **a. Recognition of Diversity**

After the 1998 Reformation, Indonesia entered a new phase marked by the opening of public space and increased freedom of expression. Decentralization and democratization policies provided opportunities for ethnic groups to re-express their cultural identities—whether through regional languages, traditions, or other cultural symbols. This recognition of diversity was not limited to the cultural realm but was also reinforced by regional autonomy policies, which granted local communities the freedom to manage governance and development according to their respective ethnic and cultural characteristics. Thus, previously marginalized ethnic identities began to gain formal and social legitimacy within the context of national life.

This situation differs significantly from the New Order era, which emphasized homogeneity and stability through the narrative of "Unity" and a centralized approach. During that time, the expression of ethnic identity was often restricted because it was considered potentially disruptive to national unity. In contrast, post-Reformation, ethnic diversity is no longer viewed as a threat but rather as a cultural potential that enriches the nation. A more open space for local identities—from the preservation of customs to the rise of ethnic communities in local political spaces—strengthens the position of ethnicity as part of a more plural and inclusive national identity.

This recognition of diversity subsequently influences how nationalism is understood in the post-Reformation era. Nationalism is no longer forced to be singular or centralized, but rather moves toward a more flexible and multicultural perspective. Ethnic identity becomes an important source of solidarity and membership in the nation-state, while a sense of nationhood is built through respect for differences. Thus, the post-Reformation era presents a new model of nationalism that allows ethnicity and nationality to complement each other, rather than negate each other. This model provides an important foundation for Indonesia in maintaining unity amidst increasingly visible and recognized diversity.

##### **b. Strengthening Ethnic and National Identities**

The strengthening of ethnic identities in the post-Reformation era does not necessarily weaken nationalism; in fact, in many cases, ethnic identities serve as an important foundation for building a stronger and more inclusive national identity. When ethnic groups have space to express their culture, language, and traditions, a sense of collective self-confidence emerges that strengthens their ties with the wider community. This recognition of local identities helps people feel valued and acknowledged within the state structure, thus fostering their loyalty and attachment to the Indonesian nation.

Contemporary research shows that ethnic identity and national identity are not mutually exclusive. In fact, a well-maintained ethnic identity can serve as "social capital" that supports the formation of an inclusive nationalism. When people understand that Indonesian national identity is built on diversity, not uniformity, respect for local cultures contributes to the creation of a collective awareness of what it means to be part of a multiethnic nation. Thus, strengthening ethnic identity also reinforces the nationalist narrative that emphasizes diversity as a key national characteristic.

In this context, strengthening ethnic identity serves as a bridge to a more mature and dialogical nationalism. A sense of national belonging grows naturally when each ethnic group sees itself as an integral part of the national mosaic. National identity then develops as a result of the harmonious interaction between various local identities, rather than something imposed from above. Thus, appreciation of local cultural values not only enriches national culture, but also becomes a strategic step in maintaining Indonesian unity and integrity amidst the increasingly prominent ethnic diversity in the post-Reformation era.

##### **c. Local Identity Politics**

Post-Reformation, democratic liberalization and the implementation of regional autonomy have provided greater space for local communities to determine their own leaders. In this context, ethnic identity has become a crucial factor used as a basis for political mobilization, particularly in regional elections such as gubernatorial, regional, and mayoral elections. Political candidates often leverage ethnic, cultural, and regional ties to build emotional bonds with voters. This occurs because people tend to feel more comfortable and trust figures who are perceived to represent the values, traditions, and identity of their ethnic group.

The phenomenon of local identity politics also demonstrates how ethnicity can be a strong source of political legitimacy. Political support based on ethnic similarities is often perceived as a more authentic form of representation, where leaders are perceived as able to understand the aspirations and needs of their communities. This situation is increasingly evident in regions with a homogeneous ethnic composition or in areas with a history of ethnic conflict. In such situations, ethnic identity becomes not only a symbol of pride but also a strategic instrument for building a solid electoral base.

However, the strengthening of local identity politics also presents its own challenges to the process of democratic consolidation. Reliance on ethnicity as a tool for political mobilization can potentially reinforce primordialism, which ultimately risks dividing society if not managed properly. Nevertheless, this phenomenon still reflects an important reality: that ethnicity has increasingly played a role in the public sphere post-Reformasi as a result of increased political freedom and a more decentralized government structure. Therefore, local identity politics must be understood not merely as a threat, but also as a socio-political dynamic that needs to be balanced with an inclusive national narrative to maintain national stability and unity.

#### **d. Integration and Potential Conflict**

Ethnic identity essentially has two sides: it can create strong solidarity within a group, but at the same time, it can create social boundaries that differentiate "us" from "them." In the context of post-Reformasi Indonesia, freedom of expression and more open politics have allowed ethnic identities to emerge more clearly in the public sphere. This situation can have positive impacts in the form of strengthening a sense of togetherness within communities, but it also creates potential friction between groups when these identities are used as the basis for political, social, or economic claims. Therefore, managing diversity is crucial to preventing horizontal conflict.

Indonesian history shows that ethnic-based conflict can arise when competition between groups increases and is not balanced by strong integration mechanisms. For example, political struggles, economic disparities, or the struggle for local resources can trigger ethnic tensions if fair and inclusive policies are not in place. In the era of decentralization, when regional authority is expanding, the potential for this conflict can be even greater if managed without a multicultural perspective. Therefore, the state has a crucial role in ensuring that ethnic plurality does not become a source of division, but rather a foundation for harmonious social life.

In this context, strengthening national identity through shared values such as Pancasila and the motto "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" (Unity in Diversity) is an important instrument for fostering social integration. Pancasila provides a moral and philosophical foundation for equitable inter-ethnic relations, while Bhinneka Tunggal Ika emphasizes that differences are not barriers to unity. When these values are effectively instilled through education, public policy, and the practice of national life, national identity can serve as an umbrella that encompasses all ethnic identities. Thus, diversity is no longer a potential source of conflict, but rather a collective strength that enriches and strengthens Indonesian unity.

#### **e. Minority Group Dynamics**

Post-Reformasi, changes in state policies that were more inclusive of minority groups opened up new spaces for their social and political participation. Minority groups, such as ethnic Chinese Indonesians, who during the New Order era experienced restrictions on cultural expression and political space, can now appear more openly in various sectors of public life. The elimination of discriminatory regulations and the recognition of cultural freedom have given this group the opportunity to assert their identity without fear or stigma. As a result, they have become a more visible and active part of various national social, economic, and cultural activities.

The increased participation of minority groups in national and local politics reflects a growing sense of belonging to Indonesia as a nation. The involvement of Chinese figures in political organizations, businesses, social communities, and even public office demonstrates that strengthening their ethnic identity does not hinder them from contributing to national development. Instead, this strengthening of their identity serves as social capital that encourages them to engage more deeply in championing national issues. This situation demonstrates a new dynamic: that ethnic minority identity can go hand in hand with an inclusive national identity.

This phenomenon of increasing minority participation also signals a shift in Indonesian nationalism toward a more pluralistic and egalitarian model. When minority groups feel valued and included, they develop a greater commitment to the state and the democratic process. This also serves as an indicator of the success of the Reformation in expanding democratic space and strengthening national integration through managing diversity. Thus, the dynamics of minority groups post-Reformation can be understood

as evidence that inclusivity and recognition of diversity are key to building a strong and sustainable Indonesian nationalism.

### **Challenges of Ethnic Identity in the Formation of Post-Reform Nationalism**

#### **a. Social Fragmentation and Intergroup Competition**

Post-Reform, freedom of expression has provided opportunities for various ethnic identities in Indonesia to become more visible in the public sphere. However, this simultaneously creates the risk of social fragmentation as ethnic groups increasingly assert the boundaries of their identities. Strengthened ethnic solidarity is beneficial for preserving local culture, but it can also make groups more closed and exclusive. When internal solidarity is much stronger than attachment to national identity, communities can struggle to build a sense of community with other groups. This poses a serious challenge to the formation of an inclusive and cohesive nationalism.

In addition to identity fragmentation, competition between ethnic groups is also increasingly evident in political, social, and economic contexts. In some regions, the struggle for local political office, budget allocation, and access to public resources is often influenced by ethnic proximity between candidates and voters. When this competition is not based on principles of justice and inclusivity, certain ethnic groups can feel marginalized or unfairly represented. Such situations can trigger tensions and rivalries that further strengthen inter-ethnic divisions. In the long term, these dynamics can disrupt social stability and hinder the internalization of national identity.

The greatest risk of social fragmentation and intergroup competition is the potential for ethnic-based horizontal conflict, as occurred in several regions of Indonesia at the beginning of the Reformation era. Without effective integration mechanisms, ethnic diversity can become a source of conflict, especially when combined with political, economic, and historical inequality. Therefore, the state needs to play a crucial role in ensuring that ethnic differences do not develop into antagonism. Efforts to strengthen multicultural education, equitable development, and policies that encourage inter-ethnic dialogue are essential to prevent conflict and maintain national cohesion amidst increasingly prominent cultural diversity.

#### **b. Identity Politics and Polarization**

The more open democratization following the Reformation era has provided ample space for public participation in politics, but this has also given rise to increasingly prominent practices of identity politics. Ethnicity, previously suppressed during the New Order era, is now often used as political capital to gain public support, particularly in regional head elections. This strategy capitalizes on the emotional and cultural closeness between candidates and specific ethnic groups, thus creating a solid electoral base. While this practice is considered normal in competitive local politics, it has the potential to sharpen ethnic boundaries within society.

When identity politics is used excessively, the narratives emphasized tend to emphasize differences, rather than similarities, between ethnic groups. This fosters exclusivist sentiments, where certain ethnic groups feel they have more rights or are closer to power than others. Such exclusive narratives not only break down social solidarity but also hinder the formation of an inclusive national identity. National identity should be unifying, but intense identity politics can reduce that identity to a secondary or even subordinate position to ethnic identity. As a result, group loyalty takes precedence over commitment to the nation as a whole.

This challenge is further complicated by the advent of digital media and information technology, which accelerate the spread of identity messages. Digital platforms are often used to disseminate provocative political discourse, including on ethnic issues, to mobilize support or attack political opponents. Social media algorithms that amplify emotion-based content contribute to polarization, as negative or discriminatory information goes viral more quickly than messages that foster unity. If not balanced with digital literacy and adequate regulation, digital media can deepen fragmentation and weaken the formation of inclusive nationalism. Therefore, the challenges of identity politics and polarization demand the role of the state and society in strengthening cross-cultural dialogue and national values that can unite differences.

#### **c. Weaknesses in Internalizing Inclusive Nationalist Values**

One of the main challenges in the formation of nationalism after the Reformation is the weak internalization of national values such as Pancasila, tolerance, and the motto "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" (Unity in Diversity) in everyday life. Many Indonesians have a strong sense of their ethnic identity because it is intimate, concrete, and passed down through generations. Conversely, national identity is often understood abstractly and not always felt in their lived experiences. When nationalist values are not translated into social practices and are not deeply understood, they become less effective in binding together communities from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Structural factors such as development inequality, social injustice, and economic disparities between regions contribute to weakening nationalism. Ethnic groups or regions that feel they receive less attention, opportunities, or representation in government tend to construct exclusive narratives that they are outside the national mainstream. This "we are not prioritized" sentiment can erode a sense of belonging to the nation and strengthen internal ethnic-based solidarity as a form of identity compensation. Consequently, national identity struggles to grow solidly without a sense of justice and equal opportunities for all groups.

The state's failure to instill national values equally also creates room for ethnic exclusivism to flourish. When national education is not practiced consistently or becomes merely a formality, society is easily influenced by narrow identity narratives, especially in the polarizing digital age. Without proactive efforts to strengthen multicultural education, cross-cultural dialogue, and policies that emphasize social justice, inclusive nationalism will be difficult to achieve. Therefore, building nationalism post-Reformasi requires a strong state commitment to embodying the values of Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity) in public policy, the education system, and social life, so that national identity truly becomes a unifying umbrella for all ethnic groups in Indonesia.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Ethnic identity played a crucial role in the formation of Indonesian nationalism after the Reformation. The widespread freedom of expression following the collapse of the New Order provided space for the reemergence of previously suppressed ethnic identities. In this context, ethnic identity is not necessarily incompatible with national identity; on the contrary, recognition of diversity actually strengthens a sense of belonging to the nation. The Reformation has provided momentum for more inclusive integration, where various ethnic groups feel more recognized as part of a multicultural Indonesia. The strengthening of ethnic identity has also proven to go hand in hand with the formation of a more modern and dialogical nationalism. When ethnic groups are given space to express their culture and traditions, they emerge with the ability to build a collective consciousness that enriches national identity. For example, minority groups such as the Chinese ethnic group have begun to demonstrate increased socio-political participation, a sign of a growing sense of belonging to Indonesia. The phenomenon of local identity politics has also become part of the post-Reformation social dynamics, reflecting how ethnicity now functions as social and political capital in the public sphere. However, this positive dynamic is not without its accompanying challenges. Social fragmentation, intergroup competition, and the rise of identity politics have the potential to weaken social cohesion if not managed effectively. Polarization fueled by exclusive narratives and amplified by digital media demonstrates that ethnic identity can be a divisive factor if not framed within an inclusive national context. Furthermore, the suboptimal internalization of the values of Pancasila, tolerance, and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity) in society poses a serious obstacle to the formation of a nationalism that truly embraces all ethnic groups. Therefore, efforts to build nationalism after the Reformation require a more comprehensive and sustainable strategy. The state needs to strengthen multicultural education, create fair and equitable policies, and develop spaces for inter-ethnic dialogue to foster mutual trust. National identity must be developed not by suppressing local identities, but by transforming them into a force that enriches the nation's identity. Only through proper management of diversity can Indonesia realize an inclusive nationalism that can serve as a foundation for unity amidst the complexity of its people's ethnic identities.

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