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Embracing Multiculturalism and Fostering Political Stability in Pontianak (West Kalimantan)

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Members of the Dayak tribe at the Gawai Dayak Festival in Pontianak, West Kalimantan. The Gawai Dayak festival by Dayak tribes in Kalimantan is an annual thanksgiving festival to celebrate their harvest. Photo by Louis ANDERSON/AFP taken on 20 May 2018.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- West Kalimantan has been a conflict-prone province. Between 1963 and 1999, the region witnessed a total of 12 conflicts, the most notable of which was the inter-ethnic clash in 1999 in the Sambas regency, which triggered an outflow of refugees to neighbouring areas.
- However, its capital, Pontianak, manifests the reverse. The communities living in the city have been able to resolve past conflicts amicably, and are constantly working together to foster harmony and unity. In fact, they draw inspiration from the city's cultural treasures and religious traditions.
- Identity politics in Jakarta during the 2016/2017 Ahok saga and in the city's neighbouring areas did not trigger massive religious and ethnic tensions in Pontianak itself. In fact, they strengthened the city's community-based religious institutions, and further facilitated open and honest engagements.
- This article explores the different phases of Pontianak's multicultural history. While several challenges remain, the people of Pontianak have effectively harnessed their cultural heritage and diversity to foster political stability.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1963 and 1999, several violent conflicts were recorded in West Kalimantan province.¹ In 1996/1997, the Sambas conflict garnered global attention after Madurese residents from the province were expelled into neighbouring towns.² And in 1999, the deadly Sambas riots occurred. These conflicts resulted in certain ethnic groups, notably the Madurese, departing from West Kalimantan and Sambas altogether.³ Amid these conflicts, Pontianak emerged as the primary destination for expelled Sambas refugees. Pontianak, the capital city of West Kalimantan province, was—and still is—home to diverse ethnic and religious groups. As will be discussed shortly, even though Islam is its dominant religion, and Malay is the majority ethnicity, other religions and communities live harmoniously in that city.

The influx of refugees initially posed new challenges for Pontianak. The city was receiving ethnic communities such as Dayaks, Malays, and Madurese into its backyard, in the aftermath of conflicts in the broader West Kalimantan region. Impressively, Pontianak successfully mitigated any provocation of hatred and politicised ethnicity, and it is today a beacon of unity in diversity in Borneo.

An examination of social relations at the macro and micro levels sheds light on Pontianak's recipe of success, despite being surrounded by territories bound by identity tensions that are often fanned by politicians.⁴

This paper examines Pontianak's experience navigating diversity and how it overcame challenges to its social fabric from the 1960s to the 1990s. It delves into how the people of Pontianak responded to conflicts in the past, and how they managed to incorporate the values of multiculturalism into their current political culture. The article starts with a discussion on the demography of Pontianak, how it confronted challenges in the past, followed by a discussion on its model of multiculturalism, and the implications of this on political stability.

ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY DURING THE REFORMASI PERIOD

Pontianak occupies a strategically advantageous geographical location. First, it is located near key regional growth cities like Batam, Pekanbaru, Natuna, and Pangkalan Bun. The region is well-connected by public and trade transportation routes, including the port in Pontianak. Second, it is a gateway to neighbouring countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam.⁵ Currently, Pontianak is home to approximately 673,400 residents from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Islam constitutes the religion of the majority (60.2%), followed by Catholicism (22.14%), Christianity (11.58%), Buddhism (5.73%), Confucianism (0.28%) and Hinduism (0.05%).⁶ In terms of ethnicity, the population consists of Malay (34.5%), Javanese (13.84%), Dayak (12.98%), Madurese (11.96%), Chinese (11.81%) and Bugis (7.92%).⁷ This ethnic profile does not necessarily match that of the broader West Kalimantan province, where Dayaks and Malays constitute a similar proportion of the population, at about 34% each.

The diversity of ethnicities and religions in Pontianak follows a distinctive pattern. According to expert observations, ethnic groups in the city are often associated with specific religions. This affiliation generally falls into two categories: Malay and non-Malay. The term 'Malay'

signifies affiliation with Islam, while ‘non-Malay’ often indicates affiliation with the Christian religion, either Protestant or Catholic.⁸ More specifically, ‘Dayak’ is commonly associated with Christianity, Chinese with Confucianism and Buddhism, while Malay, Madurese, Javanese, and Bugis are associated with Islam. However, in everyday social interactions among residents, the Malay ethnicity is commonly seen as a representation of Islam. As such, individuals of Dayak or Chinese descent who practise Islam are often recognised and identified as being part of the Malay community.⁹

At the height of the 1998 reformasi period, which led to the downfall of authoritarian military leader Suharto, signs of conflict became more prevalent in the broader West Kalimantan province. Persistent efforts by majority ethnic groups, such as the Dayak, to marginalise minority groups and other ethnic communities took place. The collapse of the New Order regime further presented an opportunity to reconfigure the rules, enabling the majority ethnic group of West Kalimantan—in this case, the Dayak—to assume control over various areas claimed as their territory and assert their political influence and rights to natural resources.¹⁰ In response, Pontianak sought to foster unity among all sectors of society through governmental, cultural, and religious institutions, and to uphold Pontianak’s status as a home of diversity.¹¹

In 1999, Sambas, a regency in West Kalimantan, witnessed inter-ethnic violence between the Dayaks, Madurese, and Malays. The conflict started mainly between Dayaks and Madurese, the latter seen as a “migrant” community in the area. The Malays joined forces with the Dayaks to attack the Madurese, and the conflict left about 1000 people dead.¹² Neighbouring Pontianak took heed of the Sambas experience and strengthened its multicultural and multi-religious character. It emerged as one of the safest places in West Kalimantan during these tumultuous times. During the Sambas riots, many victims sought refuge in Pontianak, dispersing across several sub-districts. Although the influx of refugees—predominantly Madurese—presented new challenges such as resettlement, potential conflicts and the emergence of territorial racialisation politics, Muhtifah highlighted that government institutions, religious organisations, ethnic communities, and academic establishments generated constructive responses to overcome these challenges.¹³ These communities even sought solutions from the inherent values found within religion and culture.¹⁴

In this regard, the Sambas riots sparked some urgency among the ethnic groups in Pontianak to establish formal ethnic organisations such as the Dayak Traditional Council (DAD), the Malay Traditional and Cultural Council (MABM), the Madurese Extended Family Association (IKBM), the Javanese Community Association (PMJ), the Chinese Traditional and Cultural Council (MABT) and other more minor ethnic associations.¹⁵ Simultaneously, there have been efforts to institutionalise religion for better representation and dialogue. For the Muslim community in Pontianak, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah remain the two mainstream organisations, followed by 19 relatively smaller groupings. Other religious communities, such as the Catholics, are represented by four mass organisations, while others only have one organisation each.¹⁶ These groups openly engage with one another whenever potential crises arise, and seek steps to mitigate them through open discussions..

Between 2016 and 2017, propelled by the rise of digital information media, the conflict landscape in the broader West Kalimantan generated fear of new conflicts triggered by religious issues elsewhere. This was partly influenced by the heightened identity politics

observed in Jakarta's gubernatorial election, which saw a mass mobilisation that eventually led to the downfall of Chinese-Christian governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, affectionately known as Ahok. Similar dominant narratives dichotomising Muslim and non-Muslim identities were also utilised in the gubernatorial election taking place in West Kalimantan¹⁷ and contributed to the polarisation between ethnicities and religious groups. This development increased the potential for territorial racialisation in Pontianak, an area that could perpetually become an extended conflict zone, given that its inhabitants represent a microcosm of the diverse ethnicities from all regions of West Kalimantan. Again, Pontianak withstood these challenges through dialogues between community institutions formed a decade earlier.

MULTICULTURAL DISCOURSE IN PONTIANAK

Awareness about ethnic and religious plurality in Pontianak was captured in several scholarly studies that offer various perspectives, encompassing education,¹⁸ pluralism,¹⁹ and the intricate connections between religion, ethnicity, and conflict.²⁰ While this attention is a commendable first step, it cannot be deemed to be sufficient, given that multicultural events in Pontianak are still overshadowed by past conflicts and prevailing political motives for territorial racialisation. These factors pose a significant threat to the residents of Pontianak and political stability at both the local and national levels.

Pontianak's multiculturalism is inherently tied to practical considerations. Historical records reveal that the Qadriyah sultanate, established in 1771, exhibited remarkable openness in accommodating the interests of Pontianak's diverse community groups. Notably, the Qadriyah sultanate itself was founded by a mixed dynasty comprising Arabs, Malays, Bugis, and Dayak.²¹ This historical fact underscores the longstanding social cohesion and harmonious coexistence ingrained within Pontianak's social fabric. Such values have been passed down through generations via political and cultural practices. The notion of multiculturalism, for instance, was demonstrated by the acceptance and integration of the ethnic Chinese community into Pontianak society in 1875 under the sultanate. Not only were the Chinese community granted freedom to coexist harmoniously, the sultanate also provided institutional space for the Chinese community to gather, a practice that continues to this day. This openness paved the way for the establishment of various Chinese institutions, including the precursor of the Halim Pontianak Foundation, which strives to protect traditional Chinese music.²² Such openness fostered an awareness among the people of Pontianak until today, that every ethnic group has a right to gather in their enclaves to preserve their respective culture and foster harmonious inter-ethnic relations. Consequently, many ethnic communities emerged with their respective cultural institutions as mentioned above.

In addition to its historical and cultural heritage, the presence of religious groups in Pontianak has significantly contributed to the discourse on multiculturalism through their endeavour to cultivate a harmonious life. This stems from the fundamental notion requiring acknowledgement of diverse identities within social life and the equitable application of this recognition across various facets of life.²³ Central to a profound comprehension of multiculturalism is the core principle of social cohesion, emphasising the imperative to avoid discriminatory or belittling attitudes towards other groups.²⁴ Religious groups in Pontianak actively strive to embody these substantial meanings through concrete efforts. Major circles within Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) embrace and serve as principal advocates

for promoting religious harmony.²⁵ On a larger scale, the local chapter of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), representing Indonesian Muslims, actively promotes religious harmony through its preachers and media channels, beyond its traditional topics relating to rituals, spirituality, and belief.²⁶

Academics from various religious backgrounds have also initiated support for multiculturalism. This includes prominent Yohanes Bahari from the Christian circles, while Hermansyah, Zaenudin, Haitami, Faizal Amin, Syarif, Firdaus Ahmad, Lukman Hakim, and Muhammad Nur from the Muslim circles. Additionally, Siaman, Sutadi and Putu Dupa Bandemi represent Buddhist Confucianism and Hindu circles respectively.²⁷ These academics and intellectuals engage in discussions on multiculturalism within the context of West Kalimantan. At the institutional level, multicultural discourses and practices are further facilitated by the Inter-Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), an initiative the government supports.²⁸ The target audience of these elite-driven discourses is on campuses.

Moreover, the notion of multiculturalism in Pontianak remains consistent with the national motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” (Unity in Diversity), which became a constitutional milestone incorporated into the 1945 Indonesia Constitution. Pontianak cherishes this principle more than in other parts of Kalimantan and Indonesia as a whole. Sukarno had formalised this slogan, and it took various cultural forms during the Suharto era.²⁹ Translating it seamlessly into national and state life has not been without challenges, as evident in the persisting discrimination against minority groups or religions in many parts of Indonesia. However, during President Abdurahman Wahid’s (Gus Dur) tenure, a significant breakthrough occurred for the Chinese: the recognition of the Confucian religion as an official state religion. This policy marked the pinnacle of macro awareness concerning recognising minority religions.³⁰ The ensuing consequences would undoubtedly impact micro-awareness, particularly in Pontianak and within individual religious communities. What President Abdurahman Wahid implemented falls under the category of ‘civic multiculturalism’,³¹ and this initiative directly contributes to cultivating a better understanding of multiculturalism among the residents of Pontianak, during the immediate post-Suharto period and beyond. To illustrate, the 2017 Ahok controversy in Jakarta did not spill over into Pontianak, and the ethnic Chinese community was still able to perform their activities as usual with no interference from other ethnic groups.

Multiculturalism in Pontianak is an integrated effort. Historical elements give birth to cultural diversity, while religious and academic dimensions foster the ideals. Meanwhile, political elements contribute to the development of an open attitude. This comprehensive process signifies that the people of Pontianak have evolved into an open society, successfully drawing on historical experiences, religious teachings, and state institutions. Consequently, Pontianak has transformed into a welcoming and inclusive city.

RECIPE FOR PONTIANAK’S POLITICAL STABILITY AND HARMONY

In more recent years, Pontianak has observed stable economic growth and politics. In 2022, Pontianak experienced improved economic growth compared to the previous five years, surpassing the national economic growth at 5.4%.³² This growth was followed by a monthly per capita income increase from IDR 578,615 in 2021 to IDR 622,735 in 2023.³³ The city’s ability to achieve unity among diverse groups is the recipe for this.

In practice, the community and government of Pontianak promote multiculturalism through organising cultural and religious events, implementing inclusive economic practices, and fostering diverse social interactions. Multiculturalism is reflected in shared cultural practices, encompassing ceremonial events and simple social interactions within residential areas. Ethnic differences are never a barrier to political collaborations. In 2019, the mayoral and deputy mayoral pair consisted of individuals from two different ethnic groups, namely Javanese and Madurese.³⁴ Diversity trickles down to the everyday lives of society. Ceremonially, there are two types of cultural events. The first comprises general cultural events unique to Pontianak, independent of specific religious or ethnic affiliations, such as the annual celebration of Pontianak's anniversary on 23 October, and the Equatorial Earth Festival held every two years. The second consists of cultural events affiliated with specific ethnic and religious groups. These include Gawai Dayak on 20 May and Naik Dango, both associated with the Dayak ethnic group. Additionally, the Carbide cannon tradition is observed during the holy month of Ramadan by the Malays and Muslims. The Chinese community has celebrations such as Cap Go Meh and Chinese New Year.³⁵ Having these various celebrations endorsed by the city's government is a testimony of the extent diversity it cherishes.

Meanwhile, a culture that unites the simplicity of daily life is observed through collective solidarity in village or community activities. This includes joint efforts to maintain the security of residential complexes, and visits to one another during religious holidays, weddings, and ceremonies related to birth and death. A common occurrence in Pontianak is interethnic and interfaith marriages, which happens more often than in many parts of Indonesia. Anecdotally, there are many cases of Madurese men marrying Malay women, Malay men marrying Javanese women, and Malay men marrying Dayak women. Interestingly, though not commonly, if these are interfaith marriages, the couple can choose to wed under the laws and customs of their separate religions.³⁶

Similarly, religious life in Pontianak is vibrant with various religious activities where each religious group can practice their faith. This is evident in the availability of ample places of worship for every religious community in Pontianak, and there are no restrictions on how many can be built by each religion and size.³⁷ For instance, the Cathedral Church is of comparable magnificence to the Mujahideen Mosque, the biggest mosque in West Kalimantan which can house out 5000 people.³⁸ This signifies that the freedom to practise religious rites for every religious community is well-established. Peaceful interactions between different religious communities are also common in the city. One community organisation established since the New Order era is the Inter-religious Communication Forum (FKUB). It is supported by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the local government as an intermediary between religious organisations.³⁹ They conduct inter-religious prayers, co-organised by the provincial government, police and military.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

Pontianak, the capital of West Kalimantan Province, has effectively fostered positive multiculturalism despite facing challenging circumstances. These challenges include the lingering impact of past conflicts that have complicated the multiculturalism process in the city, and Pontianak's location, which is surrounded by conflict zones that include various

regions in West Kalimantan province. Overcoming these difficulties involved the local government internalising the principles of multiculturalism through scholarly and historical lenses and amalgamating these with religious values.

Essentially, the journey from such an understanding of multiculturalism to achieving political stability in Pontianak relies on three integrated pillars: its history mediating ethnic and religious tensions; its moderate and pluralist religious outlook; and inclusive politics. These three pillars are interconnected and work harmoniously to ensure that every group, whether ethnic or religious, receives proportional justice whenever any controversy arises. This approach then paves the way for stable politics, evident in harmonious daily interactions, economic growth, and active contributions to democracy.

Lastly, Pontianak's ability to galvanise civil society to tackle sensitive issues is commendable. While each group seeks to maintain their own religious and ethnic identity, they are constantly willing to engage with other groups in civil ways, to such an extent that external ethnic and religious tensions are unable to dent their strong multicultural core.

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