

## Religious Violence Through Lens of Cavanaugh's Theory: The Case of Burning Vihara in Tanjungbalai

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### **Abstract**

The incident of burning houses of Buddhist worship and destruction of ethnic Chinese dwellings in Tanjungbalai occurred on 29-30 July 2016. Local communities, regional leaders, security forces and some religious leaders considered this incident to be motivated by religious issues and ignored several other factors such as ethnicity, social political economy and so on, while many observers-academic, researchers, policy-makers, journalists, NGO workers, political commentators, among others- argues that religious violence analysis really motivated by material-based political interests, socio-economic reason, and others factor of secular ones and dismissed the religious framing of the violence. This research is based on Cavanaugh's theory that there is no purely religious or other ideological factor that is seen as dominant for the occurrence of violence. This article argues that religion plays a role in conflict dynamics in Tanjungbalai as an instrumental reason, but at the same time, attacks on Buddhist temples in Tanjungbalai are complex issues that do not purport to reveal the true state of affairs. What is apparent in riot in Tanjungbalai is competition from religion and secular factor including competition over public space, socioeconomic status, religious zoning are suggested as reasons why violent tension may exist in Tanjungbalai.

**Keywords:** Religion, Violence, Cavanaugh, Tanjungbalai

### **Introduction**

On July 29-30 2016 an incident burning Buddhist temple occurred in one area in South Tanjungbalai Subdistrict, Tanjungbalai City caused 3 monasteries, 8 Pagodas, and 2 offices get a horrible damage (Gunawan, 2016). This event is interesting to examine from the perspective of religious conflict. Because there are indications (as will be explained later) that local leaders, from the police and from the religious community, have attempted to portray this event as a form of criminal behavior, devoid of religious, socio-political and racial motivation. We know that some members of the community are local Malay Muslims and the Chinese Buddhist community, however do hold inter-ethnic prejudice. We also know that strong economic disparities in Tanjungbalai are like controlling economic resources by a group of Indonesian Chinese encourage groups to gather act violence under religious guise.

The Discussion begin with an introduction to Tanjungbalai's Demographic and to the cultural

settings, giving particular attention to native Indonesian people and Chinese culture including the acculturation of chinese culture and the position of Tanjungbalai as "Islamic City" rather than "Chinese city". It then turns to the wider reading of the complexity of the riots includes an examination of the political economy of the people of the Muslims and Buddhists, the local tension between Chinese and Muslim Malay in Tanjungbalai in the broad and varied social field of Tanjungbalai.

How to deal with this such a violence? In the discourse of social sciences, conflicts occur because of many factors such as religious sentiments, material interests, political motivations that interact with each other, exaggerating and altering each of the effects that may not appear on the surface. There is a view that religion has a set of symbols and normative ideological values that contain elements of violence (Avalos, 2005; Jurgensmeyer, 2000; Kimball, 2002). Kimball (2002) identifies signs that can be the reason why religion is so important in shaping violence. In

line with Kimball, Avalos (2005) argues that religion creates new scarcity based on unverifiable criteria or illusions. Meanwhile, Juergensmeyer describes very systematically how people commit acts of terror based on theological and ideological legitimacy derived from values in certain religious doctrines. The main argument put forward by Jurgensmeyer (2000) is that Religion becomes the dominant factor that causes violence because in the holy book religion and religious traditions there are values and doctrines that invite the perpetrators to carry out violence on behalf. The most popular idea of Jurgensmeyer is the cosmic war.

While a more moderate view holds that religion plays a role in several levels as a trigger for violence (Appleby, 2012; Hasenclever & Rittberger, 2000). Appleby (2012) divides the three categories (strong religion, weak religion, and pathological religion) in looking at the evaluation of religion and religious agency as a factor that causes violence. Furthermore, Andreas Hassenclever and Volker Rittberger (2000) are suing important questions that are often considered to be established in relation to the relationship between religion and violence. They argue that the problem when looking at the impact of religion on conflict is when religion has its influence. To answer this question, Hassenclever and Rittberger provide an important perspective on the theory of looking at the impact of faith on political conflict which is formulated in three main areas, namely Primordialist, Instrumentalist and constructivist. Primordialists hold that differences in religious traditions should be seen as one of the most important independent variables to explain the interaction of violence within and between nations. Instrumentalists conclude that religious violence is the result of economic and socio-political injustice. When a change in society that leads to a collision is a result of the distribution of power and the unjust. Constructivist argues that in many situations, religion is influenced by an alignment between the perpetrator of good and the sinner. In many ways this is influenced by the power of religious leaders. Constructivists exist between primordialism and instrumentalism. It considers social conflict inherent in cognitive structures such as ideology, ethnicity, religion.

If the above views emphasizes that in one particular condition, religion plays a role or delegates the violence. Therefore, the writer considers it necessary to propose a new reading with the theory put forward by Cavanaugh. According to Cavanaugh, the idea of religion has a tendency that causes violence is one of the essential constructions of religion. The tendency to insulate between religious violence and secular violence should be avoided because it is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying. Cavanaugh proves that religious violence is a myth. William Cavanaugh (2009, p. 17) "examine three different, overlapping types of arguments for the link between religion and violence, and show how the argument fail". For Cavanaugh "there is no reason to suppose that so-called secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, capitalism, Marxism and liberalism are any less prone to be absolutist, divisive and irrational than in, for example, the biblical God" (2009, p. 55).

I tends to see the issue of violence as a complex phenomenon. Nothing can be considered the dominant factor in conflict or violence. Especially to make religion an irrational reason for violence without considering other factors. Such a view tends to be essentialist in looking at the causes of religious violence. In my opinion, the conclusion of Cavanaugh's thesis is relevant to be used in questioning the idea of secular and religious separation. Cavanaugh concluded that there is no difference between secular and religious ideas as a cause of violence. So there is the potential for reading to the phenomenon of conflict in a broader level.

The basic assumption of this research confirms that religion influences the dynamics of violence occurring in Tanjungbalai. In addition, this article is not the sole source of violence. There are other factors which can cause communal violence. However, religion provides doctrines, ideologies, rituals, symbols, metaphors, discourses that can easily be used, misused, or manipulated by people (such as actor of violence, agents or managers of conflict and interest groups) immaterial interest (Al Qurtuby, 2015, p. 314).

## Result and Discussion

### 1. The Brief Chronology of the Riots

Although news reports about the incident at Tanjungbalai offer many perspectives of outsiders about their first glimpse. According to Jakarta Globe: the rioting on the Buddhist temples in Tanjungbalai, a city near Indonesia's fourth-biggest city of Medan, start on Saturday when resident were reportedly angry at a woman of Chinese descent who allegedly protested against a mosque using loudspeakers to broadcast calls to prayer in front of her house (Fawnia, 2016). This view was agreed by many people that the riots were based on the issue of voice speakers protested by Chinese Indonesian women. According to National Commission of Human Right (HAM, 2016a) suspected the riot caused by a resident of Tanjungbalai town who objected to the volume of adzan voice from a mosque in front of his house which then triggered the anger of the residents. Meanwhile, North Sumatera Police spokesperson Sr. Comr. Rina Sari Ginting said that riot occurred when 41-year-old Chinese ladies identified as Meliana, reprimanded and administrator of the Al Makshum Mosque to lower microphone volume (Gunawan, 2016). The meeting of Mosque officials of Al-Makhsun and Meliana triggered tension and forced the police to secure Meliana and her husband at the police station. The mob was angry and pelted Meliana's house and but the attempt to set fire to his house was prevented by the police who were there. According to Rina, the mob attempted to set ablaze the vihara but the police managed to prevent them. They could only pelt the house of wording with projectiles, damaging it. This is the start of the anarchic acts "People are angry then destroy the Juanda Vihara located approximately 500 meters from the house Meliana" (Gunawan, 2016).

Riot broke out in Tanjungbalai, North Sumatera allegedly due to provocation done by unscrupulous elements through social media. Mass emotion that has been unstoppable again finally burned a number of places of worship around the site (Panjaitan, 2016). At the same time, the masses began to gather together, led by student group elements. Here, the mass with students doing protest to the Chinese women. Furthermore, the masses are encouraged to order and had to disperse. Allegedly this mass gathered due to information through social media

(facebook) posted by one of the activists (Panjaitan, 2016). This opinion was confirmed by The Chief of National Police, General Tito Karnavian, suspecting "the incident in Tanjungbalai was caused by misscommunication. A person who is of minority ethnic may have said some things that upset other resident during azan" (News, 2016).

Explanation about the trigger of violence above can be taken important factor that is religion in general become symbolic and rhetoric factor escalating the conflict in Tanjungbalai. However religion in this case is only a symptom that tends to see it as an instrument for provoking a widespread issue in social media involving students and youths who are active in cyberspace to engage in action.

### 2. Demographic Overview and Introduction to Tanjungbalai Culture

The Province of North Sumatra (North Sumatra) is one of the largest provinces in Indonesia in terms of population and area. The largest city in North Sumatra is Medan, as its capital. According to census records, the population of North Sumatra reached in 2010 a total of 12,985,075 people. North Sumatra also represents the diversity of its people in terms of race, ethnicity and religion. Population of North Sumatra recorded consists of various ethnicities such as Batak (Toba, Pakpak Simalungun Karo and Angkola), Nias, Malay, Java, Aceh, Minagkabau, Tamil, Tionghoa, and several other ethnicities that all spread throughout the region of North Sumatra (Padang, 2011).

Among the areas that quite represent the diversity of the people of North Sumatra is the City of Tanjungbalai. The city of Tanjungbalai is a city near Indonesia's fourth-biggest city of Medan. According to the 2010 census, the data shows the spread of tribes in Tanjungbalai consisting of 15.14% Malay, Batak 42.56%, Minang 3.58%, Java 17.06%, Aceh 1.11%, China 9.33%, Nias 0, 15%, Madura 8, 39%, karo 0.73%. While based on religion, the population in the city of Tanjungbalai consists of: 81.99% Islam, 7.78 Protestants, 1.06 Catholics, 9.07 Buddhists, 0.08 Hindu, 0.02 others (BPS Tanjungbalai 2010). These data show that the demographic condition of the people in Tanjungbalai is still dominated by Muslims. However, the spread of religion is quite evenly distributed. For the scale

of Indonesian society in general, the percentage of religious minorities exceeding 5% can be considered a unique diversity phenomenon in compare with other regions in Sumatra.

Another important factor for depicting people in North Sumatra is also the worker's level. Based on the projection result, the population in Tanjungbalai City in 2016 amounted to 169,084 people consisting of 85,213 male and 83,871 female population with 36 households, 151 households spread over six objects. 50.39% male (Balai, 2017b). The working age population of 2015 in Tanjungbalai (15 years old) is 110,888 of this amount 64.83 percent of them or 71,893 people are classified as labor and the rest are classified as non-labor. Of 71,893 residents of the city of Tanjungbalai which includes the labor, 64,659 people or 89.94 percent of whom work and the rest of 7,234 people are open unemployment (Balai, 2017c).

According to the data of Tanjungbalai City's public employment level In 2015, the most dominant sectors absorbing labor in Balai Tanjungbalai are from trade, hotel and restaurant sector, communications and financial and services which absorb 77.83 percent (86. 273 people) of the aged 15 and older who are employed, while the rest is absorbed in the agricultural sector 6.02 percent (6,672 persons) and the secondary mining and quarrying sector, Industry, electricity, gas and water and construction reach 16.11 percent (17,840 people). From the 2015 data show that most workers have not/have not attended school/not/ have not graduated from primary school. There are 29.17 percent (18,860 people) of high school education workers, while diploma/university-educated workers are a small percentage of 1.86 percent (1,200 people) of the total working population. In total there are still 10.17 percent (6,576 people) workers who have not / have not attended school/no/have not graduated from elementary school (Balai, 2017a).

Looking at above data on the level of community working in Tanjungbalai City, it shows that the dominant workers are in the trade and services sector. According to Irwansyah (2013, p. 163) the success of ethnic Chinese in doing business and mastering the economy is unlikely to be offset by indigenous people. The shipowner of "Tongkang" is almost all Chinese, only one "Malay" has a

"Barge" ship, and even then there is only one remained. Compared to Christianity, the jealousy of Buddhism is stronger due to the Chinese domination of the economy in almost every sectors. This fact was also conveyed by Nasution (2005, p. 90) that in the field of hotel service and Bengawan restaurant, the fact shows that those are owned by the Chinese while the native community as the worker. This note is interesting that the dominance of ethnic Chinese who controls trade shows that there is an economic disparity in society.

### 3. A Suppression of the Religion and Race

The religious factor as the dominant cause of violence is also recognized by Nasaruddin Umar (Muslim Figures) in his interview with MetroTV. He asserts there is an indication that inclusive Buddhism is not represented by Meliana as a Buddhist (Metrotvnews, 2016). Subsequently, Umar emphasize that the religious factor is more dominant as an instrument for the violence. However Nasaruddin also acknowledges that there is a geographical role of coastal communities that tend to be heterogeneous and open. This also make is more potential for disputes (Metrotvnews, 2016). In line with that, Suhadi Sanjaya (Buddhist figure) also emphasized the role of religion as a motivator for peaceful life is not work optimally. Sanjaya blame the religions as the instrument factor for triggering inter-religious conflict in community (Metrotvnews, 2016). However, either Umar or Sanjaya do not show what aspect of religion might tend to the conflict.

If the religious figure above emphasizes the dominant religious factor causing violence, then this opinion is also in line with the comments of the Governor of North Sumatra in his interview with Kompas TV (KOMPASTV, 2016a). Tengku Governor Erry Nuradi revealed that riot occurred because of a trigger caused by sentimental comments from a Buddhist Chinese women against the volume of azan in Muslim place of worship (Mushalla) near her house (KOMPASTV, 2016b). This view reinforces that the dominant factor in the form of religious symbols such as mosques, muslim ritual (prayer), azan as symbolic values in the Islamic religion triggered the Muslim community to fight against other community.

The above data show that the significance that Buddhists have triggered the Islamic group's offended so that Muslim-majority citizens in the area play a role in making religious symbols and identities the basis of the riot. This confirms that religion becomes the frame of the violence. This fact is confirmed by a circular of the Fatwa Commission of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) of North Sumatera (North Sumatra) officially regarding the blasphemy of Islam by Meliana in Tanjungbalai City. In the first fatwa in 2017, the MUI of North Sumatra established a religious blasphemy committed by Meliana in the town of Tanjungbalai (Rahma, 2017). However, what appears to be a religious war on is closing analysis is not the only factor that can be recognized as a trigger for conflict. Therefore this simplistic and reductionist opinion is inadequate.

#### 4. The Political and Economic Interest

Previous works on Tanjungbalai riot have focused on the historical-social roots of violence, highlighting how and why previously peaceful and peaceful religious community conflicts are now beginning to reveal symptoms of social vulnerability. They argue that religion is used as a symptom, but the act is really motivated by material-based political interest and socio-economic reason. Among these opinions is Surya (2017) which discusses the problem of diversity in society that can cause conflict. According to him, this complexity is not only a matter of religion but also political affiliation, economic motives, and different cultural orientations.

Mulyartono et al (n.d.) asserted that there is a hateful spin as the causes of hatred among the people in Tanjungbalai. Mulyartono et al considered the process of escalation of the conflict occurred due to the hate and disguised spin that had been missed. This study then argues that the hate spin is effective because it is supported by a range of factors such as previous conflict history, economic anxiety, social interaction patterns other than primarily acts of state actors.

A more explicit analysis by Fawnia (2016) suggests, although on the surface it appears to be a religious issue, more people suspect unrest due to ethnic sentiment or economic inequality. He reasoned that Tanjungbalai was closer to the

predominantly Chinese-Indonesian field. According to Fawnia there are indications that the Chinese population in Tanjungbalai that often employ local people in their businesses indicates a general economic gap. Chinese businessmen explain one report that the fact is true that Chinese living in the region are better than the indigenous people. This view is similar with Harahap (2017) who concluded that in this conflict, the economic interest and power issues of each group play significantly to optimize influence and control the relations between groups. Basically, according to him, this is a struggle of domination. Harahap here emphasizes the identity politics as well as the political economy struggle.

Yew-Foong (2016) considers that at the social level, low education, socio-economic stagnancy and job-related inequalities also contribute as a factor to unfavorable episodes as well. religion is used as a protector of public reforestation for such vengeance. Besides the fact factor of Chinese people's general superiority in economic factors, as well as in other parts of Indonesian society are starting to fear that they will start to dominate politics as well.

To conclude, scholars of the Tanjungbalai conflict have generally emphasized the political role of state constitutional change on political opportunity for citizens to have equal rights to gain political positions in the government including previous Chinese groups experiencing marginalization.

#### 5. Local Muslim-Buddha Tension

Ethnic violence in Indonesia experienced different symptoms post 1998 where rampant violence in the name of religion as a veil of various other factors behind (Schiller & Garang, 2002).

The issue at Tanjungbalai is not the first time. In 2010 the comfort of Buddhists was disturbed by several mass organizations who were acting on behalf of the United Islamic Movement (Gerakan Islam Bersatu) to demonstrate to the offices of the DPRD and Mayor of Tanjungbalai. They urged the government to bring down the Buddha Statue at the Tri Ratna Monastery. they reasoned that the existence of the statue does not reflect the Islamic impression in Tanjungbalai City and can disrupt harmony in the midst of society (Irwansyah, 2013, p. 162). Irwansyah pointed out that social conflict occurred after the establishment of the statue of

Buddha is the main factor that is stereotype dominating sentiment in a society where Buddhist perceptions similar to China actually have the potential to crack the Muslim-Buddhist social relationship in Tanjungbalai. According to Irwansyah (2013, p. 163), the political identity factor is strongly characterized by the suspicion that ethnic Chinese want to make Tanjungbalai a "Buddish Chinese City".

According to Mustagfirin (2012) when commenting on the issue of Buddha statue decline caused by two things that is because they are the fourth largest tribe and control the economy. Heterogeneous potentials affect the Malay and Chinese conflict Islam vs Buddha. In Nasution's (2005, p. 90) research, Bengawan's hotels and restaurants are owned by Chinese and indigenous as Chinese workers in Tanjungbalai, their numbers are small but the economy is controlled by all of them. This resulted in the magnificence of the Buddhist temple buildings compared to the Great Mosque of Tanjungbalai that had long been neglected. So there is a tendency to strengthen local Muslim-Buddhist tension in Tanjungbalai.

This historical factor further emphasizes that there is a background conflict of dominance between Islam and Buddhism in Tanjungbalai. The opinion about the dominant factor that caused the conflict in Tanjungbalai as an ethno-religious conflict was raised by National Commission of Human Rights (HAM, 2016b) report in 2016. Komnas HAM believes that there has been destruction and burning of houses of worship and homes ethnic hatred (HAM, 2016c). Komnas HAM in this case further strengthen the factor of ethnicity as the cause of the destruction and burning of houses and houses of ethnic Chinese worship.

## Conclusion

There are indications that the unique conflict in Tanjungbalai is no dominant factor. It seems clear that there are emerging subjects who want to articulate their identity to the public sphere. Not because they have been dominated by the government but an opportunity for them to fight. This article acknowledges that there has been a trigger to violence caused by religion that occurred in Tanjungbalai in 2016. However, it is too simplistic

and reductionist to say that there is only one factor that led to the event. This article concludes that the riots on Tanjungbalai are nestled in a complex web of local tension, religious differences, economic-political interests, inter ethnic conflict and symbolic representations including identity politic and also rumors in social media.

It realizes that religion plays a role in triggering for the conflict. The religious factor provides a powerful and effective force in mobilizing the masses from other collective identities as Scott Appleby (2012, pp. 57–61) says that religious loyalty is able to translate the religious identity and symbols of society so as to ignore rational calculations, at the same time religion are indeed manufactured or invented within particular historical and political contexts. If religion is recognized as influential in the dynamics of violence, it affirms that religion is not the only factor that causes violence, in other words not the dominant factor in conflict and violence. If religion becomes a trigger and a symptom of conflict at the surface level then the same can also be to other factors such as economic, political, social and so forth. This is in line with what Cavanaugh (2011, p. 685) said that war and violence are not the struggles between religion and secularism, but between the two skewed visions of social order that are both, in different ways, sacred.

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