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The Roots of Social Conflict in North Maluku (1999-2004) Ethnic Religious Rivalry and Political Power Struggle

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Abstract: This study analyzes the roots and escalation of social conflict in North Maluku during 1999–2004 and examines the relevance of educational approaches in addressing ethnic rivalry, religious polarization, and local political competition. The study employed a qualitative method through literature review and analysis of historical documents obtained from secondary sources. Data were collected from records of conflict dynamics, local government policies, and socio-political developments in North Halmahera. The analysis used a descriptive-analytical approach to identify patterns of conflict, the roles of political actors, and structural factors contributing to communal violence. The findings reveal that the conflict was not solely caused by religious differences, but was strongly influenced by political elite competition, struggles over economic resources, especially mining, and the mobilization of ethnic and religious identities to gain political legitimacy. The study also indicates that the absence of effective educational frameworks promoting tolerance, social cohesion, and civic awareness contributed to the escalation of violence. Therefore, the study emphasizes the importance of peace education, multicultural education, and critical civic education as strategic approaches to support social reconciliation and inclusive local governance.

Keywords: Social Conflict, North Maluku, Ethnic Rivalry, Religious Conflict, Political Power, Communal Conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Social conflict is a phenomenon that cannot be separated from the dynamics of pluralistic society. From a sociological perspective, conflict is understood as a social process that arises due to differences in interests, values, identities, and the distribution of resources among community groups (Prayogi, 2023). In the global context, identity conflicts involving ethnicity, religion, and political power have been on the rise in the past two decades, especially in countries with multicultural societal structures (Johansson, 2024). This phenomenon shows that social diversity can be a source of integration as well as potential conflicts if not managed in an inclusive manner. Research on social conflicts in various regions of the world shows that communal conflicts are often rooted in a combination of

intertwined identity, economic, and political factors. According to Byrkovych et al. (2023), ethnic conflicts often develop not only because of cultural differences, but because of competition for political power and access to economic resources. Other research conducted by Yousaf (2025) It shows that the mobilization of ethnic and religious identities in modern conflicts is often used by political elites to strengthen the base of social support. Therefore, the study of social conflict is not only important to understand the dynamics of intergroup relationships in society, but also to identify structural factors that can trigger the escalation of communal violence.

Indonesia as a country with a high level of social diversity has a relatively large potential for conflict if it is not managed through effective social integration mechanisms. With more than 1,300 ethnic groups and hundreds of regional languages, Indonesia is one of the largest multiethnic countries in the world (Pepinsky et al., 2024). This diversity is a cultural wealth as well as a challenge in maintaining social cohesion and national political stability. In recent decades, Indonesia has experienced various communal conflicts involving ethnic and religious sentiments, such as the conflicts in Poso, Ambon, and North Maluku. These conflicts show that social identity is often a tool for mass mobilization in situations of political and economic competition. According to research conducted by Mietzner (2025), communal conflicts in Indonesia are often related to the process of political decentralization that opens up new spaces for competition at the local level. In addition, a study conducted by Dunkin' Donuts (2024) explained that changes in the post-reform political structure also triggered the emergence of rivalry between local elites who used group identity as a political strategy. In this context, social conflict cannot be understood only as a horizontal conflict between societies, but also as part of the dynamics of power struggle at the local level.

One of the communal conflicts that had a major impact on Indonesia's socio-political history was the conflict in North Maluku in the period 1999–2004. This conflict was initially triggered by a dispute between the indigenous people of Kao and the Makian immigrant group related to the management of the territory and economic resources in the Malifut area. However, in its development, the conflict expanded and involved the religious dimension and the rivalry of local political elites. This event caused widespread social damage, including casualties, damage to public facilities, as well as a wave of mass displacement. According to an analysis conducted by Leiwakabessy et al. (2025), communal conflicts in the Maluku region are an example of how local conflicts can develop into broader conflicts due to the interaction between identity factors and political dynamics. Other studies conducted by Djen & Qodir (2023) shows that the conflict in North Maluku cannot be separated from the competition of local elites in fighting for control of territory and economic resources. Thus, the conflict in North Maluku not only reflects conflicts between community groups, but also reflects a more complex structure of power relations.

In the local context, the Kao area in North Halmahera Regency has the characteristics of a pluralistic society because it is inhabited by various ethnic and religious groups. In addition to indigenous peoples such as the Kao, Pagu, Modole, and Boeng tribes, this area is also home to immigrant groups such as the Makian, Bugis, and Javanese tribes. This diversity creates dynamic social interactions while opening up opportunities for social conflicts if they are not managed harmoniously. In some studies on communal conflict, pluralistic societies often face challenges in establishing stable social integration. According to research conducted by Rizwan (2024), ethnic and religious conflicts tend to increase in areas that have intergroup interactions that are not supported by strong social institutions. In the Indonesian context, research conducted by Bernard et al. (2023) shows that social conflicts in the regions are often influenced by development inequality and unequal distribution of resources. Therefore, the social dynamics in the Kao region are an important context for understanding how communal conflicts can develop in a multiethnic society.

Although various studies have discussed conflicts in Maluku and North Maluku, most of these studies still emphasize the dimension of religious conflict as the main factor causing communal violence. Such perspectives tend to simplify the complexity of conflict by ignoring other structural factors such as political elite rivalry and economic competition. Some recent research suggests that communal conflict is often the result of the interaction of various interrelated factors. According to research conducted by Khan (2022), communal conflicts are often triggered by elite competition in utilizing group identity as a tool of political mobilization. In addition, research conducted by Petrova (2022) It shows that communal conflicts can develop if there is a failure of political institutions to manage conflicts of interest at the local level. In the Indonesian context, a study conducted by Kim & Garcia (2023) It also emphasizes that communal conflicts are often related to unstable local political dynamics. Thus, there is still a research gap in understanding the North Maluku conflict as a multidimensional conflict involving ethnicity, religion, and politics simultaneously.

Based on the research gap, it is important to study the roots of social conflict in North Maluku to be carried out more comprehensively. This research does not only view conflict as a conflict between community groups, but also as part of a broader power competition process. A multidimensional approach is needed to understand how ethnic and religious identities can be mobilized in the context of local political competition. According to the analysis presented by Watson (2023) Communal conflicts often develop through the interaction between local dynamics and elite political strategies. This shows that social conflict cannot be understood in isolation from the power structure that surrounds it. Therefore, this study seeks to integrate sociological, political, and economic analysis in explaining the dynamics of the North Maluku conflict.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the roots of social conflict in North Maluku in the period 1999–2004 by examining the relationship between ethnic rivalry, religious polarization, and political power struggle at the local level. This research also aims to identify the structural factors that trigger the escalation of conflict as well as the role of political elites in the process of mobilizing group identity. By using a social conflict analysis approach, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of communal conflict in multiethnic societies. In addition, this study also seeks to explain how local conflicts can develop into broader conflicts due to the interaction between various social and political factors. This research not only describes the phenomenon of conflict descriptively, but also provides a theoretical analysis of the dynamics of social conflict.

This research is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the study of the sociology of conflict. Theoretically, this study can enrich the literature on communal conflict by showing that social conflict in North Maluku is a multidimensional conflict involving the interaction between ethnic, religious, economic, and political factors. The findings of this study are also expected to provide a new perspective in understanding the relationship between social identity and power struggles in multiethnic societies. Practically, the results of this research can be a reference for local governments, social institutions, and community organizations in formulating conflict prevention strategies and sustainable peace development. This research is also expected to be the basis for the development of more inclusive policies in managing social diversity in Indonesia. Thus, the study of the North Maluku conflict not only has academic relevance, but also has important implications for efforts to maintain social stability and national integration.

This study also highlights the relevance of applied education in addressing social conflict by emphasizing the role of education in promoting tolerance, multicultural understanding, and critical civic awareness. Integrating peace education and multicultural education into learning practices can serve as a strategic approach to prevent conflict

escalation and strengthen social cohesion in pluralistic societies. Therefore, this research not only contributes to conflict studies but also provides practical implications for the development of applied education in fostering inclusive and peaceful communities.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study design to analyze the roots of social conflict in North Maluku in the period 1999–2004. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is able to explain complex social phenomena in depth through the interpretation of historical data, documents, and scientific literature relevant to the research topic. The literature study method allows researchers to examine various sources of knowledge related to the dynamics of social conflict, including aspects of ethnicity, religion, and political power struggle in multiethnic societies (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022).

The data sources in this study consist of secondary data obtained from various documents and literature relevant to the North Maluku conflict. The data includes scientific books, academic journal articles, research reports, mass media archives, local government policy documents, and historical documents that discuss communal conflicts in North Maluku. In addition, this research also utilizes publications of research institutions, international organization reports, and academic documents that examine the dynamics of ethnic and religious conflicts in Indonesia. The use of various sources of literature aims to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that cause social conflicts and the development of conflicts over time.

The data collection technique in this study was carried out through documentation studies and literature reviews (Morgan, 2022). The documentation study was carried out by examining various historical documents related to the North Maluku conflict, including conflict reports, media archives, and government policy documents relevant to the event. Meanwhile, a literature review was carried out by examining various previous studies that discussed communal conflicts in Indonesia and theories of social conflict from a sociological perspective. This technique aims to identify conflict patterns, actors involved, and structural factors that trigger communal violence in North Maluku. In addition, the researcher also conducts source criticism to assess the accuracy, credibility, and relevance of each document used in the research.

The data analysis in this study uses descriptive-analytical analysis which is carried out through several stages. The first stage is the data reduction process, which is selecting and organizing data that is relevant to the focus of the research. The second stage is data categorization, which is grouping data based on main themes such as ethnic rivalry, religious conflicts, and political power struggles. The third stage is data interpretation, which is interpreting the relationship between various factors found in the study to explain the dynamics of social conflict in North Maluku.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses the source triangulation technique, which is comparing information obtained from various documents and different literature. Triangulation is carried out by checking the consistency of information between various data sources such as books, journal articles, research reports, and media archives (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Transformation of Conflict from Ethnic Rivalry to Religious Polarization

This study shows that social conflicts in North Maluku initially did not appear as religious conflicts, but as conflicts rooted in ethnic rivalries, customary land disputes, and inequality of access to socio-political resources. Tohe et al. (2025) emphasized that the early

phase of the conflict highlighted the competition between the Kao people as the original group and the Makian people as an immigrant group. Thus, ethnic identity becomes the main entry point for understanding how conflicts are formed before they develop into a religious dimension.

One of the main triggers of the conflict was administrative changes through Government Regulation Number 42 of 1999 which included certain villages in Malifut District (Djen & Qodir, 2023). For the Kao people, the policy is seen as a form of takeover of customary land that has so far only been lent to Makian residents due to the threat of the eruption of Mount Kie Besi. On the other hand, the Makian people view the move as a legitimate formal state decision and therefore legitimize their new residence. According to Väyrynen (2023), this difference in perspective on the legitimacy of the region is what hardens the conflict between groups and becomes the basis for the escalation of the conflict in the early stages.

The findings of the study also show that ethnic tensions are amplified by social jealousy that has developed before. The Kao people see the Makian group as relatively advanced in bureaucracy, trade, and access to work, including in the mining sector, resulting in a feeling of marginalization in their own region (C. M. Ham, 2025). From the perspective of the sociology of conflict, it can be understood as a form of competition between groups for scarce resources, in which collective identities are then used to assert social claims (S. Ham & Woolcock, 2022). Basic identities often become particularly strong when groups feel they are in a situation of threat to their social and political existence.

In the next stage, the conflict underwent a transformation from ethnic conflict to religious polarization. This shift was evident after the massive exodus of Muslim Makian residents to Ternate, Tidore, and other Muslim-majority areas, which was followed by attacks on Christian communities in several locations (Kurniawan, 2017). In this situation, religion is no longer just the background of identity, but has transformed into a major category that divides society more broadly. The experience of displacement, collective trauma, and the spread of rumors play a crucial role in transforming local conflicts into religious-based communal conflicts.

The change in the character of the conflict confirms that religion is not the sole cause of conflict, but rather an effective medium of mobilization when ethnic sentiments and social injustices have already hardened. In many cases, communities that initially clashed over administrative and economic issues then articulate those conflicts in religious language because religious identities have broader mobilizing power. Maarif (2023) explained that communal conflicts in Indonesia often present religion as an external face, even though there are deeper socio-political factors behind it. Therefore, a reading that only places the North Maluku conflict as an Islamic-Christian conflict will simplify the complexity of the real problem.

The results of this study are in line with the purpose of the research, which is to show that the root of social conflict in North Maluku lies in the relationship between ethnic rivalry, religious polarization, and political competition. The findings also show that conflicts are evolving gradually, from ethnic-based local disputes to broader religious-based communal conflicts. Within that framework, religion works as an accelerator of conflict, while ethnicity is the initial foundation for the formation of social dividing lines. Thus, the North Maluku conflict is more accurately understood as a multidimensional conflict that relies on the interaction between identity, interests, and power.

Conflict Escalation Patterns in the Four Waves of Violence

The results of the study show that the North Maluku conflict developed through several waves of interrelated violence. Based on a search of documents and literature, conflict does

not take place as a single explosion, but as a gradual process that shows an escalation of actors, territory, and intensity of violence. Touwe & Lasaiba (2025) divides the North Maluku conflict into three main waves, while subsequent developments, especially the Duma incident, show an advanced phase that can be read as the fourth wave. This kind of reading is important because it makes it clear that conflict moves dynamically and does not stop at a single momentum

The first wave occurred in August 1999 in Kao Bay and Malifut, with the dominant nuances in the form of ethnic conflicts and disputes over customary territory. Tensions escalated after clashes between villagers, which were followed by attacks on Makian villages and damage to homes, public facilities, schools, and houses of worship. At this stage, the target of violence is still strongly related to the disputed area and the direct relationship between Kao and Makian. The early patterns of violence show that the conflict is still rooted in local disputes despite the scale of the damage.

The second wave from October to November 1999 showed a sharper increase, both in the number of victims and in the area affected. The massive attack on the Makian people in Malifut was followed by the displacement of tens of thousands of people, and the experience of the evacuation then became a medium for the spread of trauma and the spirit of revenge to other regions. In this phase, the boundaries between ethnic conflict and religious conflict began to blur as religious identity slowly became the basis of new solidarity. According to Touwe & Lasaiba (2025) Displacement not only displaces people, but also shifts memories of violence, narratives of suffering, and threat perceptions that accelerate the escalation of conflict.

The third wave, which lasted from late December 1999 to March 2000, showed that the conflict had evolved into regional-scale communal violence. The attacks in Tobelo, Galela, Jailolo, Sahu, Ibu, Bacan, and several other areas show that the conflict is no longer limited to the root of the Kao-Makian problem. The target of violence shifted to villages based on the religious identity of the majority and minority, while houses of worship became symbols that were increasingly attacked. In this context, the conflict has fully moved towards the Islamic-Christian dispute, although the source of the trigger cannot be separated from the previous conflict.

The fourth wave was reflected in the attack on Duma Village in June 2000, which had a stronger symbolic weight than the previous wave. The Duma is seen as one of the symbols of Christian development in the Gallala region, so the attack on the region is not only meant as a physical act, but also as an attack on a symbol of communal identity. This event shows that the conflict has entered a more symbolic and emotional phase of retaliation. In a sociological reading, situations like this suggest that communal violence has undergone social institutionalization, in which collective memory, symbols, and identities reinforce each other in acts of violence (Ray, 2024).

Thus, the pattern of four waves of conflict shows that violence in North Maluku develops cumulatively. Each wave does not stand alone, but is a continuation of the previous phase that enlarges the space for conflict, hardens identities, and expands the field of hostility. These findings are important because they confirm that conflict resolution is not enough to reduce one event, but rather to understand the chain of causes and reproduction of violence. Therefore, the results of this study support the view that the North Maluku conflict is a gradual, systemic, and layered historical process, not just a spontaneous clash between communities.

Political Elite Rivalry and Power Struggle as Structural Roots of Conflict

The most important finding in this study is that the main roots of the North Maluku conflict do not stop at ethnic and religious differences, but rest on elite rivalry in the fight for

local political power. The results of the document analysis show that the formation of new provinces, territorial expansion, the determination of the capital, and the struggle for the governorship position have created a new arena of competition among the elite of Ternate, Tidore, Makian, and other political groups (Hasim et al., 2025). In this situation, communal conflicts at the lower levels of society cannot be separated from political fights at the elite level. The social conflict in North Maluku actually shows clearly how elite interests can take advantage of social tensions to strengthen their respective political positions.

The feud between Ternate and Tidore became one of the historical foundations that gave shape to the political rivalry. The long history of contestation between the two great sultanates in North Maluku is not lost in the modern political system, but reappears in a new face through bureaucratic competition, political representation, and territorial expansion. When the structure of local government changed after the reform, historical memories of domination, subordination, and claims of influence were also reactivated. In this regard, modern conflicts are not entirely detached from historical heritage, because history provides a strong symbolic language for the formation of today's political loyalty (Andrzej, 2022).

The results of the study show that the Makian people do not stand alone as an immigrant group, but are in a wider network of bureaucratic and political interests. Some regional elites from the non-Ternate camp have an interest in strengthening Makian's position in Malifut as part of a political project to rival Ternate's dominance. In contrast, the Kao people tend to be in a symbolic and political orbit closer to the Ternate sultanate. In the perspective of social conflict, this situation shows that group identities are not only culturally formed, but also produced and maintained through power structures. As stated Saritaş (2025), primordial ties can be very strong when linked to concrete political interests.

The struggle for natural resources is also an important element that deepens conflicts. The presence of gold mining in Gosowong and the operations of PT Nusa Halmahera Minerals increase the strategic value of the Malifut area, so that administrative and political competition is getting tougher. Labor conflicts and the perception that local communities are excluded from economic access increase the sense of injustice. In conflict research, this kind of condition is commonly understood as distribution conflict, which is when inequality of access to economic benefits accelerates social polarization between groups (Márquez Romo et al., 2025).

In addition, the formation of the Yellow and White forces shows that elite rivalry no longer only operated in the formal political sphere, but also extended into mass mobilization. The Yellow group generally represented political and bureaucratic networks associated with dominant local elites, while the White group symbolized opposing alliances strengthened through religious and communal solidarity. As the masses consolidated around symbols of sultanate identity, religion, and territorial affiliation, the conflict shifted from elite competition to open communal violence in society. At this point, elites no longer acted merely behind the scenes, but actively shaped the narrative, direction, and logic of the conflict. Hultman & Mousa (2025) explained that in communal conflicts in Indonesia, local elites often act as a link between structural tensions and violent explosions at the grassroots level.

Thus, the results of this study confirm that the main source of the North Maluku conflict is the competition of groups in the fight for political power, which is then wrapped and mobilized through ethnic and religious identities. Ethnicity and religion remain important, but they work effectively because they operate within an already tense political and economic competitive structure. These findings also confirm the contribution of research to the study of the sociology of conflict, namely that communal conflict in multiethnic societies must be read as the result of interactions between power structures, resource distribution, and identity mobilization. Therefore, resolving the North Maluku conflict

requires a structural approach that not only emphasizes social reconciliation, but also reforms of local political governance that are more equitable and inclusive.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded that the root of the social conflict in North Maluku in the period 1999–2004 did not lie in a single factor, but was the result of the interaction between ethnic rivalry, religious polarization, struggles over economic resources, and competition for local political power. The conflict, which initially emerged from tensions between the Kao and Makian communities, developed into a broader communal conflict as it was strategically utilized by local elites to strengthen their political positions. In this process, ethnic and religious identities were mobilized as instruments to build group solidarity and expand political influence.

Furthermore, the findings confirm that the conflict in North Maluku should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in structural and political dynamics rather than purely religious differences. This condition was also exacerbated by the absence of effective educational frameworks that promote tolerance, social cohesion, and critical civic awareness within a pluralistic society. Therefore, this study emphasizes that resolving and preventing similar conflicts requires not only structural and political approaches but also the integration of applied educational strategies. The implementation of peace education, multicultural education, and critical civic education is essential to foster reconciliation, strengthen intergroup understanding, and build inclusive and sustainable social systems. In this context, education plays a strategic role as a transformative tool in preventing conflict escalation and promoting long-term social harmony.

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