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Agonizing *Pancasila*: Indonesia's state ideology and post-foundational political thought

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the implications of Indonesia's official state ideology, *Pancasila*, and its articulations in contemporary Indonesia from the perspective of 'post-foundational' agonistic theories of democracy. A set of five precepts created by Soekarno, the nationalist leader and founding president of Indonesia, *Pancasila* was integral to strategies of social control during the authoritarian 'New Order' regime of Soeharto and continues to function in Indonesia as a potent empty signifier, well over two decades after the fall of that regime in the *Reformasi* of 1998. By engaging with domestic scholarly and political discourses of *Pancasila* and *Pancasila* democracy from the agonistic perspective on democracy shaped by theorists such as Étienne Balibar, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière, this article points to the tension between the aspiration of the advocates of *Pancasila* to present *Pancasila* as democratic and their commitment to seeing *Pancasila* as an embodiment of traditional culture and values that is essential to the consistency of Indonesian national identity. The relation between the two terms that constitute 'Pancasila democracy' is further complicated by the tendency of contemporary proponents of *Pancasila* to attempt to 'immunize' the state ideology from the possibility of interruption and contestation.

Introduction

Writing amid the turbulent years of post-independence Indonesia, Justus Maria van der Kroef observed that one hears 'everywhere, in schools, in newspapers, in brochures, in speeches, and in parliamentary debates' about *Pancasila*¹ – the five precepts created in 1945 by Soekarno, the leader of Indonesia's independence struggle and its first president, that had become the country's official state ideology. That observation from the Jakarta-born philosopher and political scientist remains true to this day. *Pancasila* has been at the center of a number of important developments during the presidency of Joko Widodo that began in 2014, including the controversial new criminal code that made the propagation of 'ideas contradictory to *Pancasila*' a crime punishable by imprisonment,² and the establishment of the *Pancasila* Ideology Development Agency, or BPIP – a government agency with 'a sweeping mandate to promote and safeguard *Pancasila* values',³ whose key