

The Architecture of Disagreement: A Philosophical Inquiry into Identity, Public Reason, and Secularism in Plural Democracies

Arsitektur Ketidaksetujuan: Penyelidikan Filosofis tentang Identitas, Nalar Publik, dan Sekularisme dalam Demokrasi yang Plural

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Abstract

Contemporary democratic theory has produced three largely separate lines of inquiry: institutional design for managing identity conflict, norms of public discourse in plural societies, and models of state–religion relations. This article argues that their analytical separation is not merely a thematic division of labor but a philosophical deficiency each framework generates normative requirements it cannot fulfill without presupposing what the other two provide. That interdependency is the article's central claim, and its demonstration constitutes the article's primary contribution. Using philosophical reconstruction and internal normative critique as its method, this article addresses three interconnected problems: how identity claims can receive recognition without negating democratic equality; whether democratic stability requires substantive consensus or can rest on shared procedures of public justification; and whether secularism is a normative prerequisite for democracy or a contestable constitutional commitment subject to ongoing democratic revision. Through critical engagement with Rawls's political liberalism, Mouffe's agonistic pluralism, An-Na'im's civic reason, Stepan's twin tolerations, and Bhargava's principled distance, the article constructs an integrated three-dimensional framework that treats managed dissensus rather than final consensus as the constitutive condition of democratic legitimacy under deep pluralism. The article's core argument is that identity recognition becomes democratically legitimate not when it achieves resolution, but when it operates within publicly accountable limits: conditions under which disagreement is still conducted among civic equals rather than deployed as a strategy for dismantling equality itself. Plural democracy is not sustained by eliminating conflict but by institutionally distinguishing productive dissensus from antagonism that destroys the very terms of democratic coexistence

Keywords: Plural Democracies, Public Reason, Agonistic Pluralism, Secularism, Politics Identity.

Abstrak

Teori demokrasi kontemporer telah melahirkan tiga jalur kajian yang sebagian besar berjalan sendiri-sendiri: desain kelembagaan untuk mengelola konflik identitas, norma-norma wacana publik dalam masyarakat yang majemuk, dan model hubungan negara-agama. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa pemisahan analitis ketiganya bukan sekadar pembagian kerja tematik, melainkan sebuah defisiensi filosofis, masing-masing kerangka menghasilkan tuntutan normatif yang tidak dapat dipenuhinya sendiri tanpa terlebih dahulu meminjam prasyarat dari dua kerangka lainnya. Ketergantungan itulah yang menjadi klaim sentral artikel ini, dan demonstrasi atas ketergantungan tersebut merupakan kontribusi utamanya. Dengan menggunakan rekonstruksi filosofis dan kritik normatif internal sebagai metode, artikel ini menelaah tiga persoalan yang saling berkelindan: bagaimana klaim identitas dapat memperoleh pengakuan tanpa meniadakan kesetaraan demokratis; apakah stabilitas demokrasi mensyaratkan konsensus substantif atau cukup bertumpu pada prosedur bersama dalam justifikasi publik; dan apakah sekularisme merupakan prasyarat normatif bagi demokrasi ataukah ia sebuah komitmen konstitusional yang dapat diperdebatkan dan terbuka untuk direvisi secara demokratis. Melalui keterlibatan kritis dengan liberalisme politik Rawls, pluralisme agonistik Mouffe, civic reason An-Na'im, twin tolerations Stepan, dan principled distance Bhargava, artikel ini membangun sebuah kerangka tiga dimensi yang terintegrasi, kerangka yang menempatkan dissensus yang dikelola, bukan konsensus final, sebagai kondisi konstitutif bagi legitimasi demokratis di bawah pluralisme yang mendalam. Argumen inti artikel ini adalah bahwa pengakuan identitas menjadi legitim secara demokratis bukan ketika ia mencapai resolusi, melainkan ketika ia beroperasi dalam batas-batas yang dapat dipertanggungjawabkan secara publik: kondisi di mana ketidaksepakatan masih berlangsung di antara sesama warga yang setara secara sipil, bukan digunakan sebagai strategi untuk meruntuhkan kesetaraan itu sendiri. Demokrasi plural tidak dipertahankan dengan menghapus konflik, melainkan dengan membedakan secara kelembagaan antara "dissensus" yang produktif dan antagonisme yang menghancurkan syarat-syarat dasar koeksistensi demokratis.

Kata Kunci: *Demokrasi Plural, Nalar Publik, Pluralisme Agonistik, Sekularisme, Politik Identitas.*

A. Introduction

A persistent paradox marks democracy in plural societies. The diversity of identity constitutes a normative foundation for democratic equality, yet it simultaneously generates enduring risks of political polarization. Identities rooted in ethnicity, religion, and gender increasingly function not merely as social categories but as politically salient resources mobilized in electoral competition, often producing zero-sum dynamics that undermine social trust and democratic cohesion, particularly in divided societies.¹ This pattern has been widely observed across both emerging and consolidated democracies, indicating that pluralism represents a structural rather than episodic challenge to democratic governance.²

Yet the deeper problem is not pluralism itself, but the theoretical architecture we have built to manage it. Existing frameworks tend to treat identity politics as a problem to be resolved, through better institutions, cleaner discourse norms, or more principled secularism, rather than as a constitutive condition of democratic life that demands ongoing navigation. This distinction matters philosophically. A framework oriented toward resolution will always be tempted toward finality: a stable consociation, an overlapping consensus, a settled secularism. But plural democracies do not arrive at finality. They persist through managed tension. The question this article pursues is therefore not how democracy can overcome identity conflict, but how democratic arrangements can render such conflict generative rather than destructive.

At the normative level, identity politics is closely linked to demands for recognition. Fukuyama conceptualizes this dynamic through *thymos*, distinguishing between *isothymia*, the demand for equal recognition, and *megalothymia*, the desire for superiority over others.³ Earlier theories of recognition similarly emphasize that struggles for dignity and respect are

¹ Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict, Updated Edition With a New Preface* (University of California Press, 2008); Donald L. Horowitz, "The Challenge of Ethnic Conflict: Democracy in Divided Societies," *Journal of Democracy* 4, no. 4 (1993): 18–38, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1993.0054>.

² Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018); Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

³ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (Profile Books, 2018); Francis Fukuyama, "Why National Identity Matters," *Journal of Democracy* 29 (2018): 5; Francis Fukuyama, "Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 97 (2018): 90; Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, First Edition (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

constitutive of modern political conflict.⁴ While democratic institutions are normatively committed to satisfying claims of equal recognition, they remain vulnerable to exclusionary interpretations of identity when recognition claims intersect with majoritarian politics.⁵ Democratic states often struggle to translate recognition into inclusive institutional practices under conditions of intense pluralism and electoral competition.⁶

This tension exposes a philosophical deficiency that existing scholarship has not yet adequately addressed. The literature on identity and democracy has generated three largely parallel lines of inquiry: institutional design, norms of public discourse, and models of state–religion relations each with considerable internal depth. But the separation of these strands is not merely a thematic division of labor; it reflects a deeper theoretical assumption that each domain can be stabilized independently.⁷ This assumption, I argue, is mistaken. Institutional arrangements generate the conditions under which discourse norms become operative or hollow. Discourse norms, in turn, shape which identities can be publicly claimed and how religious claims enter civic life. And models of secularism determine whether state institutions can remain genuinely neutral or whether neutrality becomes its own form of exclusion. These domains are

⁴ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (The MIT Press, 1996); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”*: An Essay (Princeton University Press, 1992); Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism and “the Politics of Recognition,”* ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁵ Rogers Brubaker, *Grounds for Difference* (Harvard University Press, 2015); Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition,” *New Left Review*, no. 3 (June 2000): 107–20; Nancy Fraser, “Recognition without Ethics?,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, nos. 2–3 (2001): 21–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632760122051760>.

⁶ Monique Deveaux, *Gender and Justice in Multicultural Liberal States*, vol. 9780199289790 (Oxford University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199289790.001.0001>; Ibrahim Olayinka Akinyemi et al., “Social Inclusion Policy Effects on Democratic Satisfaction in Europe: A Catalyst of Polarization Threatening the Identities of Privileged Social Groups,” *Frontiers in Sociology* 10 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1567394>; Laura R. Valladares, “An anthropological perspective at the usurpation of indigenous identity in the 2018 and 2021 elections in Mexico,” *Vibrant Virtual Brazilian Anthropology* 18 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-43412021v18a804>; George Genyi, “Democratic Consolidation in Africa: A Comparative Analysis of the Challenges of Elections in Liberia and Kenya,” *African Renaissance* 16, no. 2 (2019): 55–74, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2516-5305/2019/v16n2a3>; Randi Gressgård, *Multicultural Dialogue: Dilemmas, Paradoxes, Conflicts* (Berghahn Books, 2011).

⁷ Erik Henningsen and Sigrid Røyseng, “Cultural Policy, Politicians and the Logic of Appropriateness,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 0, no. 0 (2025): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2025.2490171>; John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford University Press, 2002); James Bohman, *Democracy across Borders: From Dêmos to Dêmoi* (MIT Press, 2007), <https://direct.mit.edu/books/monograph/1840/Democracy-across-BordersFrom-Demos-to-Demoi>; Jan Olsson, “Institutionalism and Public Administration,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1458>.

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not parallel; they are structurally co-constitutive. Theorizing them separately produces frameworks that are locally coherent but normatively incomplete, capable of diagnosing one dimension of democratic failure while remaining blind to how failures across dimensions reinforce one another.

One major strand of the literature emphasizes institutional design as a mechanism for managing identity conflict. Horowitz proposes centripetal institutions that create incentives for cross-group cooperation, such as alternative vote systems and pre-electoral coalition building, to moderate exclusionary political appeals.⁸ This approach highlights the role of electoral incentives in shaping elite behavior and voter alignment in divided societies. In contrast, Lijphart advances consociational arrangements that explicitly recognize group identities through elite power sharing, minority vetoes, and segmental autonomy.⁹ While both approaches seek to stabilize plural societies, they involve distinct trade-offs regarding democratic accountability, elite cartelization, and long-term legitimacy.

A second strand focuses on the normative conditions of public discourse. Rawls conceptualizes pluralism as a permanent feature of democratic life and introduces public reason and overlapping consensus as mechanisms for sustaining constitutional stability amid deep moral disagreement.¹⁰ An-Na'im extends this framework through the notion of civic reason, emphasizing the possibility of religious participation in public deliberation through reasons accessible across doctrinal boundaries.¹¹ By contrast, Mouffe challenges the ideal of final consensus and advances agonistic pluralism, arguing that democracy must institutionalize legitimate conflict to prevent the exclusion and moralization of political opposition.¹² These perspectives converge on the insight that democratic stability depends less on substantive agreement than on procedural norms governing contestation and justification.

⁸ Horowitz, "The Challenge of Ethnic Conflict."

⁹ Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy* (Yale University Press, 2012), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bg23>; Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (Yale University Press, 1977), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dszvhq>.

¹⁰ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1993); John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (1997), <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclrev/vol64/iss3/1>.

¹¹ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹² Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Routledge, 2005); Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso, 2000).

A third strand addresses the relationship between the state and religion. While secularism is often treated as a prerequisite for democracy, comparative research demonstrates the existence of multiple secularisms rather than a single universal model.¹³ A third strand addresses the relationship between the state and religion. While secularism is often treated as a prerequisite for democracy, comparative research demonstrates the existence of multiple secularisms rather than a single universal model.¹⁴ Stepan further conceptualizes democratic accommodation through the principle of twin tolerations, balancing institutional autonomy from religious authority with state tolerance toward religiously motivated political participation within constitutional limits.¹⁵ These models highlight the importance of flexible arrangements in deeply plural societies.

Thus, in this article will problematize three notion. Problem 1 examines how identity accommodation can be democratically legitimate, not merely stable, by asking what discursive and secular conditions must hold alongside inclusive institutional incentives and minority rights protections. Problem 2 assesses whether procedural agreement, rather than substantive consensus, can carry genuine normative authority across deep difference, and what institutional and secular arrangements make this possible. Problem 3 asks whether secularism is necessary for democratic governance, and which models most credibly honor the presuppositions that religious political participation requires. None of these is a self-contained question. Each is a refraction of the same underlying challenge: how plural democracy can remain normatively coherent without demanding what it cannot and should not compel.

This article does not merely synthesize these three strands. It argues that their theoretical separation has itself become a source of normative inadequacy and that what plural democracy requires is not a reconciliation of these frameworks but a reorientation of the question each addresses. Horowitz and Lijphart ask how institutions can contain conflict; this article asks what institutional conditions make identity-based recognition democratically productive rather than merely containable. Rawls and Mouffe disagree on whether consensus or agonism should anchor democratic discourse; this article holds that the more fundamental issue is what kind of public reasoning can sustain solidarity across genuine, irresolvable difference. Kuru and Stepan map the terrain of secularism's variations; this article asks what normative standard should govern those

¹³ Alfred Stepan, "The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democratic and Non-Democratic Regimes," in *Rethinking Secularism* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Ahmet T. Kuru, "Passive and Assertive Secularism: Historical Conditions, Ideological Struggles, and State Policies toward Religion," *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007): 568–94.

¹⁵ Alfred Stepan, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations,'" in *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, ed. Timothy Samuel Shah et al. (Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199827978.003.0005>.

variations when religious identity is both a source of democratic belonging and a site of democratic contestation.

The integrated framework this article defends rests on three interdependent pillars: inclusive institutional design that balances cross-group incentives with minority protections; an ethic of public discourse grounded in public or civic reason without demanding substantive consensus; and an adaptive model of secularism that safeguards both state neutrality and religious freedom. What holds these pillars together is not a vision of final harmony but a commitment to what I call “*managed dissensus*” a constitutive rather than residual feature of democratic life. Identity-based recognition, on this account, need not be a source of fragmentation. It can become, under the right conditions, a productive force within democratic politics: generative of solidarity precisely because it does not erase difference.

B. Identity Politics Between Recognition and the Common

Good

The central dilemma of plural democracy is not whether identity should enter politics, but under what conditions identity-based claims remain democratically defensible. Ethnic, religious, and gender identities constitute legitimate sources of political motivation rooted in demands for recognition yet these same identities can be mobilized into strategies that erode civic solidarity, harden social boundaries, and displace the very equality they claim to serve. The question is not one of inclusion or exclusion but of orientation: toward what end does recognition reach, and by what standard do we evaluate it?

This article proposes that the common good provides that orienting standard not as a pre-political harmony waiting to be uncovered, but as a regulative democratic achievement: the ongoing institutional and discursive work of sustaining arrangements that protect equal standing, equal freedom, and basic opportunity for all citizens, including those whose identities place them at the margins of majoritarian power. The common good is neither the aggregate of group preferences nor a neutral space above political contestation. It is a normative horizon that democracy must constantly negotiate without ever fully reaching. Recognition is justified as a corrective to the historical and structural deficits that prevent marginalized citizens from participating as genuine equals and it loses its democratic legitimacy

precisely when it functions instead to entrench group dominance over others.

This framing also supplies a threshold that must be specified with precision: when do identity claims become democratically unacceptable? The answer is threefold. Identity claims are democratically illegitimate when they structurally subordinate the equal standing of other citizens to group priority; when they instrumentalize recognition as a resource for exclusion rather than inclusion; or when the institutional arrangements they demand cannot be publicly justified as compatible with equal freedom and basic opportunity.¹⁶ These are not merely procedural failures. They represent substantive violations of the democratic commitment to persons as free and equal a commitment that recognition is meant to advance, not override. When recognition detaches from these egalitarian standards, it risks displacing democratic equality altogether.¹⁷

From this normative grounding follows the institutional challenge. Centripetal approaches redesign electoral incentives to require cross-group appeals through preferential voting systems or multi-ethnic coalition requirements discouraging exclusivist platforms and redirecting identity energies toward shared policy goals.¹⁸ By harnessing the dynamics of mutual identification, such mechanisms can expand democratic solidarity where social integration permits¹⁹ Yet incentive-based moderation is not universally sufficient. In contexts marked by deep segregation or asymmetric capacities, smaller or highly marginalized groups may lack the leverage to benefit from centripetal competition.²⁰ here civic equality standards are not met, alternative arrangements become normatively warranted.²¹

Consociationalism offers one such alternative, institutionalizing power sharing through mutual vetoes, proportional representation, and segmental autonomy providing structural guarantees against domination for minorities who cannot benefit from competitive incentives alone.²² Neither model is normatively superior in the abstract. The decisive criterion is contextual but not arbitrary: which configuration, given the specific distribution of social power, historical disadvantage, and institutional capacity, most credibly advances equal standing, equal freedom, and basic

¹⁶ Amy Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 7–8, 26–27, 30.

¹⁷ Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy*, 16–17.

¹⁸ Horowitz, “The Challenge of Ethnic Conflict”; Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict, Updated Edition With a New Preface*.

¹⁹ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–47; Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups, With a New Preface and Appendix* (Harvard University Press, 1971).

²⁰ Terry M. Moe, *The Organization of Interests: Incentives and the Internal Dynamics of Political Interest Groups* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

²¹ Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy*, 26–27.

²² Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*; Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*.

opportunity?²³ Where structural vulnerability is acute, Kymlicka's group-differentiated rights provide the necessary corrective, not as departures from universal citizenship but as instruments for realizing it under historically unequal conditions, combining universal anti-discrimination standards with proportional, context-sensitive accommodations for disadvantaged groups.²⁴ Practically, this implies a dual-track framework that combines universal standards, including non-discrimination, freedoms of religion and association, and equal access to public services, with proportional, context-sensitive accommodations for disadvantaged groups.²⁵ Such an approach protects minorities from majoritarian domination while avoiding the essentialization of identity that can lock citizens into rigid categories and constrain political mobility.

As Gutmann emphasizes, identities are multiple and fluid. Identity groups are politically salient but do not comprehensively constitute persons, and policy should not treat them as if they do.²⁶ Institutional accommodation alone is insufficient without normative conditions governing how identity enters public contestation. Rights-consistent regulatory frameworks for elections, campaigns, and hate speech can reduce incentives for extreme polarization without suppressing dissent. Deliberative practices centered on reason-giving and cross-communal engagement shift debate from symbolic boundary-drawing toward publicly assessable policy consequences

On Gutmann's account, democratic deliberation expresses reciprocal respect among ethical agents and requires identity-based claims to be justified in terms that others can evaluate, even amid reasonable disagreement.²⁷ These norms do not demand neutrality toward comprehensive doctrines nor the privatization of identity. Rather, they discipline contestation by linking recognition to reasons responsive to civic equality.

Religiously plural societies further underscore the importance of civic reason as a translation practice. Faith-based arguments may legitimately enter public debate when articulated in forms accessible across doctrinal

²³ Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy*, 29–30.

²⁴ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1996), <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198290918.001.0001>; Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199240981.001.0001>.

²⁵ Bhikhu C. Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

²⁶ Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy*, 35–36, 40–41.

²⁷ Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 27–29, 34–35.

lines, without homogenizing belief or excluding religion from the public sphere.²⁸ This approach reflects a two-way protection; democratic governments should accommodate conscientious dissent whether religious or secular when doing so respects ethical agency and does not produce unjust discrimination, while maintaining the legitimacy of general laws that protect civic equality.²⁹ The aim is neither to privilege religious identity nor to exempt it categorically, but to calibrate accommodations to the demands of justice within a framework that treats conscience as a core dimension of personal identity.

Similar principles govern associational freedom. Freedom of association is integral to democratic liberty, including the freedom to form distinctive identity groups. Yet when powerful associations shape the distribution of basic opportunities, exclusionary practices must be constrained by the same civic equality standard that governs institutional design and public discourse.³⁰ Democratic governments must not become agents of discrimination, even when tolerating limited expressive exclusions in the name of free speech.

Under this integrated architecture institutional, discursive, and associational recognition functions as a democratic resource rather than a driver of fragmentation. This is not merely theoretical: it is borne out in the contested terrain of religious identity politics in Indonesia, where demands for recognition have simultaneously advanced and threatened democratic inclusion, and where the boundaries between legitimate accommodation and majoritarian capture remain actively disputed.³¹ The overarching criterion remains constant. Identity politics is democratically justified to the extent that it advances civic equality, equal freedom, and basic opportunity and unjustified precisely when and because it undermines them.

C. Can Democracy Endure Without Substantive Concensus? Managing Disagreement in Plural Societies

A central dilemma in plural democracies concerns whether political stability requires a stable substantive consensus. One influential answer emphasizes public reason as articulated by Rawls, and extended through

²⁸ An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*.

²⁹ Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy*.

³⁰ Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy*.

³¹ Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*, Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics (Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316344446>; Arfi Hidayat et al., "Between Isothymia and Megalothymia: Addressing Religious-Based Identity Politics in Indonesia," *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies* 10, no. 2 (2024): 2, https://doi.org/10.30983/islam_realitas.v10i2.8210; Marcus Mietzner, *Military Politics, Islam, and the State in Indonesia: From Turbulent Transition to Democratic Consolidation* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009).

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civic reason by An-Na'im requiring that coercive laws be justified by reasons accessible across diverse moral and religious doctrines. A contrasting view, developed within agonistic pluralism, rejects the aspiration to final consensus as anti-political and instead treats persistent disagreement as a constitutive feature of democracy.³² The tension between these approaches raises a fundamental question: can democratic legitimacy be sustained without shared substantive agreement? This section argues that it can but only if procedural consensus is understood not as a thin pragmatic compromise, but as a normatively demanding achievement in its own right.

Rawls conceptualizes pluralism as a permanent condition of modern societies and proposes overlapping consensus on constitutional essentials and basic justice as the basis of democratic stability.³³ Public reason does not resolve deep metaphysical disagreements but regulates how citizens and officials justify political power particularly in matters of fundamental rights by appealing to reasons that reasonable citizens can accept despite divergent worldviews.³⁴ This framework aligns with deliberative democratic theory, notably Habermas's account of legitimacy grounded in inclusive, non-coercive communicative processes.³⁵ Extending this logic to religiously plural societies, An-Na'im formulates civic reason as a mode of participation in which religious citizens translate their moral commitments into publicly shareable justifications while rejecting the coercive enforcement of doctrine through the state.³⁶ These approaches aim to secure cooperation without uniformity by anchoring legitimacy in publicly testable reasons rather than shared comprehensive beliefs.³⁷

Yet this aspiration is not without its critics, and their objections run deeper than mere preference for conflict over harmony. Mouffe argues that the pursuit of final consensus risks depoliticizing democracy by obscuring power relations and excluding contestation that cannot be fully reconciled through deliberation.³⁸ From an agonistic perspective, democracy is sustained not by consensus but by the transformation of antagonism into regulated conflict among adversaries who accept minimal commitments to

³² Rawls, *Political Liberalism*; An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*; Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.

³³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*.

³⁴ Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited."

³⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Polity Press, 1997).

³⁶ An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*.

³⁷ Robert Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*.

³⁸ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.

freedom and equality while contesting their interpretation.³⁹ Wolterstorff presses a related concern: strict constraints on religious reasons may systematically marginalize citizens whose deepest convictions are inseparable from their faith, effectively privileging secular modes of reasoning as the unmarked norm.⁴⁰ Sunstein's notion of incompletely theorized agreements similarly suggests that political cooperation can be achieved at the level of rules or outcomes without agreement on underlying principles, a pragmatic insight that nonetheless points toward something philosophically more significant: that the search for deep justificatory consensus may be neither necessary nor desirable for democratic stability.⁴¹ Even Habermas, within the deliberative tradition, later acknowledges the need for reciprocal learning processes between secular and religious citizens including mutual translation to prevent exclusion while maintaining democratic justification.⁴²

Thus, all of the debates suggest that the opposition between consensus and conflict is overstated. Plural democracies do not require stable substantive consensus, but they do require agreement on procedures, basic rights, and norms of justification that structure ongoing disagreement. Reason-giving functions less as a mechanism for final agreement than as a discipline that channels conflict into publicly accountable forms, while agonistic contestation ensures that disagreement remains politically visible rather than suppressed.⁴³ Civic translation further mediates this relationship by enabling religiously grounded claims to enter public debate in a form open to cross-communal scrutiny, while also recognizing the epistemic standing of religious expression.⁴⁴

What these critiques reveal is not that public reason is wrong, but that it has been too frequently theorized as a mechanism for convergence rather than as a discipline for accountability. The opposition between consensus and conflict, read more carefully, is overstated on both sides. Plural democracies do not require stable substantive consensus but neither can they survive on conflict alone. What they require is something more precise: agreement on the procedures, basic rights, and norms of justification that structure ongoing disagreement. This is procedural consensus and it is normatively demanding in ways that have not been

³⁹ Mouffe, *On the Political*.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Why We Should Reject What Liberalism Tells Us about Speaking and Acting in Public for Religious Reasons," *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, 1997, 162–81; Cass R. Sunstein, "Incompletely Theorized Agreements," SSRN Scholarly Paper no. 2995488 (Social Science Research Network, 1995), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2995488>.

⁴¹ Cass R. Sunstein, "Incompletely Theorized Agreements," *Harvard Law Review* 108, no. 7 (1995): 1733–72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341816>.

⁴² Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x>.

⁴³ Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited"; Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*; Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*.

⁴⁴ Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere"; An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*.

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sufficiently recognized. It requires that citizens accept the equal standing of those with whom they profoundly disagree; that they submit their claims to public scrutiny rather than imposing them through force or manipulation; and that they remain open to revision in light of reasons they did not initially anticipate. These are not merely formal requirements. They constitute a substantive democratic ethic one that neither Rawls nor Mouffe fully captures alone, but which each partially illuminates.⁴⁵

On this account, reason-giving functions less as a mechanism for final agreement than as a discipline that channels conflict into publicly accountable forms. Agonistic contestation, in turn, ensures that disagreement remains politically visible rather than suppressed beneath a false consensus. Civic translation further mediates this relationship: it enables religiously grounded claims to enter public debate in a form open to cross-communal scrutiny, while simultaneously recognizing the epistemic standing of religious expression rather than treating it as a private matter to be bracketed at the democratic threshold. Together, these three functions disciplined justification, institutionalized contestation, and civic translation constitute the architecture of what this article calls managed dissensus: not the absence of agreement, but the democratic organization of its impossibility.

The practical implication is a model of democracy that combines procedural consensus with institutionalized dissent. Public debate requires minimum standards of accessibility, relevance, and justification standards that exclude not particular beliefs but particular modes of political engagement, namely those that refuse accountability to civic equals. Democratic institutions, meanwhile, must actively protect arenas for legitimate conflict: opposition politics, protest, a free press, and the right to dissent from prevailing majorities without losing one's standing as a citizen. In contexts marked by religious and identity pluralism, mechanisms of civic translation and deliberative engagement can prevent domination by any single doctrine without demanding value convergence. The normative superiority of this position over both Rawlsian public reason and Mouffean agonism lies precisely in what it refuses: the fantasy of final resolution on one side, and the romanticization of conflict as self-justifying on the other. Persistent disagreement, under these conditions, becomes not a symptom of democratic failure but its most honest expression and its most demanding test.

⁴⁵ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*; Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*; Mouffe, *On the Political*; Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*.

D. Does Democracy Require Secularism? Varieties of Secularism and the Inclusion of Religious Citizens

A long-standing claim in democratic theory holds that secularism is a prerequisite of democracy protecting religious freedom and preventing the domination of public policy by a single doctrine. Comparative experience complicates this claim considerably. Democracy operates under multiple forms of state-religion arrangements, and no single secular formula has proven universally necessary. The question, then, is not whether secularism is required, but in what sense it remains indispensable and whether what democracy genuinely requires still deserves the name.

This article argues that democracy requires secularism, but only in a minimal and functional sense: equal protection of freedom of religion and belief, non-establishment of any single religious tradition, and institutional capacity to manage religious diversity through procedural rules and independent adjudication.⁴⁶ Both are compatible with democracy, yet each carries distinct inclusion risks. Assertive secularism may marginalize religious minorities through exclusionary regulation; passive secularism may enable majoritarian dominance if not accompanied by effective anti-discrimination mechanisms. Neither model is normatively superior in the abstract. The standard by which they should be judged is not cultural fit or historical precedent, but a more demanding criterion: which arrangement, in a given context, most credibly secures equal standing, non-domination, and the full civic participation of religious and non-religious citizens alike?

Measured against this standard, more flexible designs demonstrate greater normative promise for deeply plural societies. Stepan's twin tolerations balance the autonomy of elected officials from religious authorities with the right of religious individuals and organizations to participate politically within constitutional limits.⁴⁷ Bhargava's principled distance goes further: the state neither rigidly separates from nor fully accommodates religion, but calibrates its engagement according to considerations of justice and equality, allowing limited cooperation with religious communities for public purposes while preventing doctrinal capture of constitutional authority.⁴⁸ The normative superiority of principled distance over strict separation or unregulated permissiveness is not merely contextual convenience. It follows from the democratic standard

⁴⁶ Rajeev Bhargava, "Political Secularism: Why It Is Needed and Why We Need to Learn Form Its Distinctive Indian Version," in *Soziale Ungleichheit, Kulturelle Unterschiede: Verhandlungen Des 32. Kongresses Der Deutschen Gesellschaft Für Soziologie In München. Teilbd. 1 Und 2*, ed. Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (Campus Verl., 2006); Kuru, "Passive and Assertive Secularism"; Stepan, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations.'"

⁴⁷ Stepan, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations.'"

⁴⁸ Bhargava, "Political Secularism"; Rajeev Bhargava, *The Promise of India's Secular Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

itself: a model that can respond to the specific distributions of religious power, historical disadvantage, and minority vulnerability in a given society is better positioned to realize equal standing than one that applies a uniform formula regardless of asymmetric conditions.

This argument must, however, confront a harder challenge. Casanova demonstrates that modernity is characterized by the de-privatization of religion, with religious actors re-entering the public sphere in ways compatible with democracy and human rights.⁴⁹ Taylor similarly argues that the secular condition signifies not the decline of religion but the pluralization of sources of meaning, requiring non-coercive state management of difference.⁵⁰ These perspectives support a more accommodating secularism. But Asad's critique cuts deeper: the secular is not a neutral architecture but a historically contingent construct a mode of power that actively shapes, disciplines, and reorganizes what counts as religion, which religious expressions are tolerable, and whose spiritual life is legible to the state.⁵¹ If the secular itself is power-laden, on what basis can this article still present secularism as a neutral framework for democratic equality?

The answer cannot be to ignore Asad's insight. It must be to take it seriously without capitulating to it entirely. Asad is right that no secular arrangement is power-neutral, and that the claim to neutrality can itself become a form of domination most visibly when minority religious practices are regulated as deviant while majority religious norms quietly shape the background assumptions of constitutional order. This is a permanent risk, not a historical anomaly. Acknowledging it means that secularism cannot be treated as a settled solution but must function as a site of ongoing democratic contestation one in which the terms of religious governance are subject to public scrutiny, revision, and challenge by those most affected by them. What this article defends, then, is not secularism as neutral architecture but secularism as a contestable and revisable constitutional commitment one oriented toward equal standing and non-domination, alert to its own power effects, and open to correction through the democratic processes it is meant to enable. Within this framework, religious citizens remain full democratic agents, and religious diversity is governed not as a

⁴⁹ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁵⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvxpz54>.

⁵¹ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Cultural Memory in The Present (Stanford University Press, 2003), <https://www.sup.org/books/anthropology/formations-secular>.

threat to constitutional order but as one of its most demanding and generative tests.

E. Conclusion

Plural democracy does not fail because people disagree. It fails when disagreement can no longer be conducted among equals when the terms of contestation become instruments of exclusion, and when recognition is claimed not as a means toward civic equality but as a license to deny it to others. The three-dimensional framework defended here inclusive institutional design, an ethic of public discourse grounded in civic reason, and a minimal but contestable secularism is not a formula for resolution. Plural democracies do not resolve; they endure. Each pillar addresses a democratic deficit the other two cannot remedy alone, and together they constitute not a theory of harmony but a theory of what must hold for disagreement to remain democratic rather than destructive.

This is where the article's central claim requires precision. Dissensus becomes democratically intolerable under three specific conditions: when it refuses the equal standing of civic opponents, treating them as enemies to be excluded rather than adversaries within a shared order; when it withdraws from public justification, advancing claims through force or institutional capture rather than reasons open to challenge; and when it structurally forecloses the participation of affected citizens in revising the arrangements that govern them. These are not procedural thresholds alone they are normative ones, rooted in the same commitment to civic equality and equal freedom that has oriented this argument throughout. Dissensus is productive when it operates within these conditions; it is destructive when it attacks them.

What this article ultimately defends is a democracy rigorous enough to insist that not all conflicts are equal and modest enough to acknowledge that distinguishing productive dissensus from democratically intolerable antagonism is itself an ongoing, never-finished democratic task. Plural democracy is not sustained by the absence of enemies. It is sustained by the difficult, continuing work of refusing to make enemies of citizens.

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