

Ethnic relations and politics in the community of South Tanjung Balai Subdistrict after the 2016 conflict

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ABSTRACT

The conflict that occurred in Tanjungbalai in 2016 was a complex phenomenon influenced by several factors, including ethnic, religious, and political factors. This conflict was triggered by differences in views and interests between groups, as well as economic inequality that worsened the situation. Therefore, this study aims to explain and describe the relationship between ethnicity and changes in local political policies after the conflict. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method, namely research that aims to be based on data obtained in the field and is accurate and in the form of interviews with the specified informants. To strengthen the explanation in this study, the researchers used ethnic political theory, conflict theory, and ethnic theory. Based on the methods and theories used, the results of this study show that the ethnic and political relations of the people in Tanjungbalai are currently running well. However, some 5% of Chinese people are still very vulnerable and require systematic and sustainable efforts to restore relations between different ethnic groups. Until now, the efforts of the Tanjungbalai city government have been very careful in maintaining religious harmony in Tanjungbalai so that this conflict does not happen again.

Keywords: Ethnic Relations; Ethnic Politics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sociologically, conflict is part of human life, so if humans want a social life free from conflict. In the sociology of conflict, conflict occurs because humans continue to build relationships between groups, giving rise to interests, differences, domination, and hostility (Anshori and Juhanda, 1995). Conflict is a part of human nature. As part of human nature, the dynamics of social conflict are greatly influenced by the underlying issues. These issues can be economic, ethnic, cultural, and religious. In the context of understanding society, Indonesia consists of different ethnic and regional cultures, which are a meeting point of different cultures from different ethnic groups.

Tanjung Balai has a population composed of very diverse ethnic groups. Tanjung Balai is a medium-sized city in North Sumatra, Indonesia, which has 6 sub-districts, an area of 60.52 km², and a population of approximately 175,000 (BPS Tanjungbalai, 2016). Tanjung Balai has several ethnic groups, namely Batak (42%), Javanese (17.06%), Malay (15.41%), Minangkabau (3.58%), Acehnese (1.11%), and others. (20.28%), with the religions being Islam (80.30%), Christianity (8.44%), Catholicism (0.76%), Hinduism (0.04%), and Buddhism (7.44%). Multiculturalism has existed since the Dutch colonial government in Tanjung Balai. The development of society, followed by official expansion, has made Tanjung Balai a densely populated city. This has caused multiculturalism, which should be bound together in diversity, to become a cultural sentiment (Ismiati, 2017).

Tanjungbalai is one of the oldest cities in Indonesia, founded on 27 December 1620. Historical documentation shows that there has never been any religious conflict in this city, either during the Asahan Sultanate, the Dutch and Japanese colonial periods, or after Indonesia's independence. The issue in Tanjung Balai concerns the ethnic relations and community dynamics between the Malay and Chinese populations in Tanjungbalai, North Sumatra, following the conflict in 2016. As is well known, in 2016, a conflict occurred that resulted in the destruction of places of worship, such as Buddhist and Chinese temples. The Malay and Chinese ethnic groups are two ethnic groups have long been present in Tanjung Balai. The Malays are the majority ethnic group, while the Chinese are a minority ethnic group of migrants or immigrants. Compared to other ethnic groups that exist in North Sumatra, the relationship between the Malay ethnic group as the indigenous and majority group and the Chinese ethnic group as immigrants is quite dynamic (Dalimunthe, K 2021).

Long before the conflict occurred, relations between the Melayu and Chinese ethnic groups and communities in Tanjung Balai were quite dynamic. Since the reform era, tensions between the two groups have arisen several times in the form of minor disputes, such as economic jealousy between the ship's crew and the ship owner in 2007 and the conflict over the establishment of a Buddha statue at the Tri Ratna Temple in 2010, before finally culminating in two major events, namely the 2010 incident in Tanjung Balai and the 2011 incident in Medan. ship crew members and ship owners in 2007 and the conflict over the erection of a Buddha statue at the Tri Ratna Temple in 2010, culminating in two major events: the Meiliana case in 2016 and the burning of the temple in 2016. However, it can be said that in Tanjung Balai, both groups lived in harmony and were never positioned against each other, at least until the outbreak of the conflict in 2016. They respected each other's religious and cultural celebrations and conducted business together. Even during the Tanjung Balai sultanate, the sultanate government and the Chinese ethnic community always got along well and were partners in business and social life.

Social conflicts often occur in Indonesia. Similar to the conflicts that have occurred in Ambon, Kalimantan, Aceh, POCO, and Sampang, these are part of ongoing conflicts caused by a lack of openness in sociocultural interactions. As a result, socio-cultural conflicts have become a normal part of life in Indonesia, which is essentially a multicultural society. The conflict that occurred in Tanjung Balai was a form of violence committed by a number of residents against ethnic minorities, in this case, the Chinese community. Violence took the form of non-physical pressure and the burning of places of worship. The Chinese community was indirectly pressured to submit to rules made by the majority.

The riots were triggered by misunderstandings and chaos arising from differences in the volume of the call to prayer. The majority of residents were very angry at Meiliana's complaint, considering it blasphemy, even though Meiliana only wanted to lower the volume of the call to prayer, which she

considered too loud. According to reports by Siswo, Irsyad and Alahasil, no one actually wanted to report Meiliana to the police. Initially, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of Tanjungbalai City was reluctant to issue a fatwa against her blasphemy. However, other institutions such as FUI, HTI, and the al-Wasliyah Islamic boarding school pressed for it. MUI was outvoted. In January 2017, they issued a fatwa stating that Meiliana's actions constituted blasphemy against Islam. These events took place simultaneously as protests against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama in Jakarta, based on the same alleged offence. In this case, the North Sumatra Regional Police finally named Meiliana as a suspect in March 2017. The charge was Article 156, subsidiary to Article 156a of the Criminal Code, concerning blasphemy. Meiliana could only cry when Judge Wahyu Prasetyo Wibowo of the Medan District Court found her guilty and sentenced her to 1.5 years in prison. Whether she liked it or not, Meiliana had to serve her sentence, even though she apologized several times.

Following the conflict, social relations between ethnic groups in Tanjungbalai have tended to improve, thanks to the joint efforts of the city government, religious leaders, community leaders, and security forces (TNI-POLRI), who have conducted regular communication, meetings, and dialogue to build harmony and maintain social stability. Although there is exclusivity and communication between the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups is mostly formal, inter-ethnic relations are maintained and do not cause significant social problems (Rosyid Moh 2020). Factors supporting peace include public awareness of stopping conflict, cooperation between various parties in achieving peace, and the active role of security forces in maintaining post-conflict stability. In addition, dialogue and communication forums between different ethnic groups have been established to address tensions arising from socioeconomic disparities and cultural differences.

Overall, although the 2016 conflict had negative social impacts, such as suspicion and physical damage, inter-ethnic relations in Tanjungbalai have now returned to normal and harmonious, thanks to ongoing reconciliation and dialogue efforts. Tanjungbalai, which was once known as an intolerant city after the conflict, no longer carries that label because harmony between religious and ethnic groups has been established. After the incident, the city government, together with the Tanjungbalai Ministry of Religious Affairs and religious and community leaders, held regular meetings or dialogues to ensure that communication and friendship between religions remained active and harmonious. Through regular dialogues held by the city government, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and religious and community leaders, it is hoped that each dialogue participant can disseminate the message to their respective communities to maintain harmony.

This study aims to provide an in-depth explanation of the relationship between ethnicity and politics in the community of South Tanjungbalai District after the 2016 social conflict. In addition, this study aims to describe the changes in local political policies that emerged after the conflict, as well as examine the role of the National Unity and Politics Agency (Kesbangpol) and the police in maintaining socio-political stability in the region. This study seeks to identify the socio-political dynamics between ethnic groups, particularly between the Malay and Chinese communities, in post-conflict recovery and the re-establishment of social harmony at the local level. Academically, this study contributes to the development of political science, particularly in the fields of ethnic politics, political sociology, and conflict management. The results of this study can be used as a reference for other researchers interested in studying similar phenomena in the multicultural regions of Indonesia. In practical terms, this research is useful for local governments and policymaking institutions as material for consideration in formulating policies oriented towards peace, social equality, and strengthening harmony between ethnic groups. In addition, the results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for security forces and civil society organizations in building sustainable mechanisms for cross-ethnic communication.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on examining the relationship between ethnicity and politics in the post-conflict context of Tanjungbalai, an area that has not been widely studied from the perspective of local politics and political sociology. Unlike previous studies that have focused more on the religious or economic dimensions of the Tanjungbalai conflict, this study combines an analysis of ethnic relations with post-conflict local political policies. This approach contributes new insights into the understanding of ethnic-based political reconciliation and shows how local government, Kesbangpol

institutions, and security forces play a role in normalizing social relations and preventing similar conflicts in the future.

This study is based on three theoretical premises. First, according to Political Sociology Theory (Damsar, 2012), the social structure and political process have a mutual influence, so that values, norms, and social interaction play a role in influencing participation in the community and in politics, with activity recommendation community political behavior. Second, Johan Galtung's Conflict Theory defines social conflict as being nurtured by direct, structural, and cultural violence. This theory is applied to analyze the roots of the Tanjungbalai conflict and the transformation process into peace via the eradication of the two types of structural and cultural violence. Third, the theory of Ethnic Politics of Donald Horowitz with Ed Robert Gurr describes how ethnic identity may be a cause of political mobilization and a source of conflict in ethnically plural societies. The three theories are applied jointly to examine the dynamics of inter-ethnic (Malay-Chinese) relations, shifts in local policy, and post-conflict reconciliation approaches.

2. METHOD

This research is a case study to describe the ethnic and political relations among the community in South Tanjungbalai District in the post 2016 conflict. This perspective was selected because it allows for the interpretation of community experiences embedded in the local socio-political milieu. "Descriptive" qualitative research can be used to study social phenomena in a way that is controlled and factual in line with what is going on in the field (Kim, Sefcik, & Bradway, 2017). The research was conducted in the village of Tanjungbalai Kota I, South Tanjungbalai sub-district, North Sumatra Province, because the location represents the heart of the conflict between the Malays and the Chinese. The techniques for collecting data were deep interviews, participatory observation, and study documentation (Sugiyono, 2011). Interviews were also held with religious leaders, government representatives, multi-ethnic communities, and institutions such as Kesbangpol and KPU, as well as participatory observation to witness firsthand the social interactions and efforts at reconciliation between parties. The research data were primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through interviews and observations, while documents such as government records, research reports, journal articles, and official archives were used as secondary data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data were analyzed based on Miles and Huberman's (2006) interactive model, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Sorting off began with relevant data while presenting was in the form of descriptive narratives to make sense of the data while drawing conclusions based on findings from the field and the theory. The validity of the data was ensured by means of source triangulation, that is, by comparing the findings of the interviews with those of the observations and documentation to confirm and corroborate the outcomes.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Ethnic and Political Relations in Tanjung Balai Kota 1 Post-Conflict

The 2016 Tanjungbalai social conflict had mixed social and political consequences for local people. Competing tensions between the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups, arising from misunderstandings related to the call to prayer, culminated in the vandalization of houses of worship and hostilities between the two parties. Following the conflict, the Tanjungbalai City Government undertook several reconciliation efforts to build social trust and harmony among citizens through multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-social institution cooperation. This strategy is consistent with and informed by Johan Galtung's concept of conflict transformation, which seeks to address immediate direct violence needs as well as long-term structural and cultural violence needs (Galtung, 1996). These reconciliation efforts were initiated by the Kesbangpol institution, community leaders, and security forces through regular meetings, interfaith communication forums (FKUB), and cross-ethnic mutual assistance activities. In each forum, the government sought to rebuild the community's collective awareness that religious and ethnic

differences were not a source of conflict, but rather a social asset that needed to be nurtured together. Malay and Chinese residents have begun to interact again in public spaces, particularly in economic and social activities since the pandemic. Although a small percentage of Chinese residents (approximately 5%) still exhibit a closed attitude due to trauma, social relations are generally showing positive signs.

According to Haris Tua Marpaung, Imam of Al-Mashum Mosque, relations between ethnic groups are now back on good terms: He said that before the conflict, the Malay, Batak and Chinese communities lived in harmony and mutual respect, and after the conflict, the community sought to repair the strained relations through social activities and communication between community leaders. "Now the community respects and tolerates each other's differences. We no longer take issue with differences in religion or ethnicity because what is most important is peace," he said ([Haris Tua Marpaung, Interview, March 23, 2025](#)). From the perspective of the Chinese community, Hakit Tjoa Klien Lie stated that the 2016 conflict had caused deep fear among the Chinese community in Tanjungbalai. Many residents chose to isolate themselves and limit their interactions with other groups because of trauma and concerns about their safety. He acknowledged that there were concerns when conducting economic activities in the market or worshipping at the temple for fear of renewed provocations. However, this situation changed after the government and community leaders organized various harmony activities and brought together leaders from different ethnic groups in a communication forum. "We used to be afraid of socializing, but now we are no longer afraid. We feel accepted and live together peacefully as before," he said. He added that activities such as Chinese New Year celebrations, which were once again held safely without disruption, were proof that trust between residents had been restored ([Hakit Tjoa Klien Lie, Interview, March 26, 2025](#)).

From the perspective of the Batak Toba community, Doni Sinurat revealed that inter-ethnic relations in Tanjungbalai are currently good and harmonious. According to him, communities from various ethnic groups, such as Batak, Malay, Chinese, and Javanese, have resumed cooperation in various social and economic activities. He believes that the 2016 conflict taught the community a valuable lesson: not to be easily provoked by divisive religious and ethnic issues. "Now, all communities respect each other. We often work together and participate in cross-ethnic activities in the same way. Our relationship is getting better, and there is no more tension," he explained. He added that even in local political activities such as regional elections, the community no longer views ethnicity as the basis for their choice, but rather assesses the candidates' programs and figures. This shows the political maturity of the community after the conflict ([Doni Sinurat, Interview, 28 March 2025](#)).

Meanwhile, the views of young people were represented by Fahri Fadil, a young man from Tanjungbalai who was active in cross-community social activities. He said that currently, social relations among young people of different ethnicities are very good. According to him, around 70% of Chinese youth are now actively interacting and mingling with Muslim and Christian youth in various sports and social activities in Xinjiang. Although a small percentage (approximately 30%) still prefers to socialize within their own communities, this no longer creates social distance. "Things are much better now. We often play futsal, hang out, and do community service together. Everyone is used to socializing and there are no problems like there used to be," he said. He added that social and sporting activities are an effective means of fostering a spirit of togetherness and eliminating the remnants of old prejudices between ethnic groups ([Fahri Fadil, Interview, March 30, 2025](#)). In addition to individual views, several community leaders highlighted the role of the local government in this reconciliation process. The government, through the Kesbangpol and the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB), regularly holds meetings between religious leaders and cross-ethnic communities to maintain communication and prevent provocative issues from arising. Cross-cultural activities, such as joint celebrations of religious holidays, national dialogues, and community service activities, symbolize the return of social solidarity in Tanjungbalai. In this regard, the police also play an active role by taking a humanitarian approach and conducting social patrols to maintain security in the neighborhood so that the community feels protected and safe.

3.2 Ethnic Relations in TanjungBalai Before and After the Regional Elections

Prior to the regional elections in Tanjungbalai, inter-ethnic relations were generally harmonious. People from various ethnic and religious backgrounds lived side by side and cooperated in their daily lives. The Malay, Batak, and Chinese ethnic groups, which dominate this region, have a tradition of mutual cooperation and a strong sense of kinship with each other. However, the political dynamics leading up to the regional elections had the potential to cause tension due to concerns that religious and ethnic issues could be used as a tool for political mobilisation. The local government and community leaders then actively engaged in persuasive approaches to prevent social friction so that the political process could proceed smoothly.

Ethnic relations in Tanjungbalai City before and after the regional elections can be understood through several important aspects. Before the elections, social conditions tended to be harmonious, with people from various ethnic groups such as Malay, Javanese, Batak and Chinese living peacefully side by side. Social and economic activities ran normally without any significant friction. Relations between community groups were based on long-established values of mutual respect and a spirit of cooperation. However, during the election period, the social dynamics became more complex due to the emergence of political polarisation, which was sometimes based on ethnic identity (Ihsan, Interview, 14 March 2025). Ethnic identity still has a strong influence on the political behaviour of the people of Tanjungbalai. In some cases, ethnic and cultural similarities are factors in determining the choice of regional head candidates. This condition shows that for some residents, ethnic factors are still considered important in determining their political choices. After the regional elections, inter-ethnic relations in Tanjungbalai tend to be influenced by the election results. If the elected candidate pair receives support from various ethnic groups, social relations will become more harmonious. Conversely, if the winning candidate pair is only supported by a particular ethnic group, inter-ethnic relations may become more tense.

The lieutenant of Sub Division IV of Election Administration, Participation and Public Relations, at Tanjungbalai City KPU, Ihsan, argued that maintaining inter-ethnic relations, before after pilkada was crucial part of a fair and peaceful democratic process. In the lead up to the election, the KPU works to increase public knowledge through cross ethnic peaceful political socialisation, and liaising with local government, police and civil society. This is to make sure all of them are in sync to keep social stability during the election.

After the regional elections, the KPU paid attention to monitoring and evaluation so that the course of the elections was full of fairness and transparency. These are efforts to maintain public trust in the election result. To anticipate misunderstanding and/or social tension after the regional election, the KPU is also dedicated to have precise and transparent information to publics. In the meantime, the KPU will also continue to optimise synergy with other components of society in order to materialise a peaceful, well-organized, and comprehensive democratic process. Prior to the regional elections, inter-ethnic relations in Tanjungbalai were moderate, as people from all walks of life resided peacefully adjacent to each other. But post-election, mild skirmishes broke out among the partisans of the different political groupings. "Although the situation in this case was already very controlled because the society was more politically and socially aware. "Election organizers must grasp the dynamics of ethnic politics, so as to avoid social conflict in the future and promote peace and justice as the culture of democracy."

3.3 Potential for Ethnic Conflict in the 2024 Regional Elections in South Tanjung Balai Subdistrict

The KPU of Tanjungbalai City considers the risk of ethnic conflict in the realization of the regional head election as a serious threat that can possibly disturb the social and democratic stability in the region. Ethnic conflict can emerge over the identities, interests, and resources of different ethnic groups within a society. In a regional election as this, such distinctions are frequently intensified through ethnic and religious-based political mobilization, which can lead to social disruption on a large scale if it is not accommodated.

Thus, the KPU stated its readiness to hold equal, transparent, and peaceful regional head elections. Anticipating possible ethnic violence, the KPU has put in place a number of strategies based on three pillars. - identifying potential areas of conflict by mapping areas and community groups that have a tendency to friction based on ethnic identity, interest, or access to political resources. Second is to formulate anticipation strategies by engaging community, religious leaders and community organisations to foster communication, and shared understanding on what it means to unity in the election period. 3: Strict monitoring throughout the entire process of the election to make sure that every step is done on the base of fairness, openness, and peace.

Ihsan, Head of the Technical Subdivision for Election Administration, Participation and Public Relations at the Tanjungbalai KPU, these are some of the main guidelines for preventing the potential for conflict in the South Tanjungbalai at that time. He said the KPU has regular coordination meetings with local government, police and local community organisations to balance security, so that all stake holders are on the same page to ensure a secure regional election. Through this way of thinking, it is expected that the democratic process will be carried out in a peaceful and participatory manner. Ihsan added the awareness of the public to respect differences in political choices is the key to maintaining social stability after the election (Ihsan, Interview, 14 March 2025).

Besides, the opportunity for ethnic conflict is also tightly connected with the degree of ethnic mobilisation behind particular candidates. In the case of Tanjungbalai, Ihsan argues that various factors may determine ethnic mobilisation. First, is ethnic identification, when a kontestan kepala daerah has an ethnic background same with a particular group, he/she will gain support from them. Secondly, ethnic interests: support is lent to those favored to have agendas/policies beneficial to certain ethnicities. Thirdly, networks closely tied candidates have strong social connections to particular groups, and these social ties can be leveraged to garner political support. Fourth is ethnic feeling, where ethnic feeling and ethnic solidarity are the bases of support. Fifth is campaign strategy, which refers to a candidate's deftness in employing ethnic imagery and a personal style to win political sympathy.

This ethnic mobilisation can also be realised through the use of identity symbols such as clan, region of origin, or regional language used in political campaigns. Social capital in the form of the number of voters in a particular ethnic group is often used as a strategic consideration by campaign teams. However, on the other hand, this phenomenon can also weaken political consolidation if not managed wisely. Internal fragmentation between ethnic groups and the practice of political co-optation can cause social friction if one group feels marginalised from the political process.

Ihsan emphasised that ethnic mobilisation is not entirely negative as long as it is carried out fairly and without discrimination. According to him, the KPU needs to monitor and regulate such mobilisation so that it does not cause social jealousy or inequality in representation between groups. Healthy mobilisation can actually help increase public political participation and strengthen the principles of inclusive local democracy. He emphasised that the role of election organisers is to ensure that no ethnic group is exploited for practical political interests, and to guarantee that the entire regional election process is conducted fairly, peacefully and democratically. In the perspective of ethnic political theory put forward by Donald L. Horowitz, the phenomenon of ethnic mobilisation reflects the use of ethnic identity as a basis for building political support. Ethnic politics can serve as a means of group representation in the political system, but it also has the potential to trigger polarisation and conflict if used exclusively. Thus, managing ethnic politics effectively is important for the maintenance of social cohesion and avoidance of identity-based conflict in the Tanjungbalai society. Cross-ethnic dialogue, inclusive political education and the impartial application of the law will be crucial in ensuring that the 2024 regional elections are conducted in a peaceful and democratic environment.

3.4 Changes in Local Political Policy After the Conflict

After the 2016 incident at Tanjungbalai City, several big shifts and turns within local polity and politics arose. Meanwhile, the local government authorities also acknowledge that the social-religious conflicts that had happened before cutting deep in social fabric exposed the local social cohesion at stake.

Hence, strategic measures were devised and implemented for social reconstruction and for laying the ground for a more nationally comprehensive and participatory form of politics. The changes in the policy involve the following aspects. Firstly, security in the city has been tightened to avoid any repetition of the incident. Security forces and local government officials and religious and community elders are collaborating to manage public order and ensure that all the citizens feel secure. On a related note, increasing interfaith dialogue is becoming a pressing need. The government partnered with leaders of different religious communities and other stakeholders to foster tolerance and develop more candid interfaith conversations. At the local level, investment incentives for local economic development are being promoted to reverse the social fractures on which ethnic antagonism had grown. Lastly, the government has increasingly made justice stronger and the legal system more predictable to allow the prevention of violence and to address it in a legal way.

Such possible dynamic is demonstrated by the policy revision. This dynamic is seen in the revision of policies and rules. The government. In a bid to bring stability and peace, the government is attempting to harness the full participation of the society at all strata. In Jalan Karya Village, Jalan Karya residents of different ethnic groups live alongside each other and work hand-in-hand in mutual assistance, leisurely walks, and even PKK activities organized by the government. This event creates harmony among the residents and removes the social jealousy that previously existed among the village members. Besides these initiatives, the government also gives high priority to the welfare oriented on improving education. Apply religious or ethnic discrimination on the citizens when offering full scholarship. This policy aims to “restore a sense of social justice and to boost people’s trust in government.” Government, traditional and community leaders, as well as the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and Police (Polri) have achieved synergy and cooperation in maintaining public order and preventing the emergence of new conflicts in the field of security. Such policies have managed to portray Tanjungbalai not as a city of intolerance but a city that is accommodating to diversity.

There are also changes in local political dynamics that the conflict has caused a turn inward for the government and society at large. The regional administration is not simply prioritizing security, but rather attempting to develop social reconciliation in the form of inclusive measures and a recognition that all ethnic groups are entitled to a sense of place. The community is now much more aware of the need for tolerance, respect and peace. What was once divisive politics along ethnic lines is now politics to unite the people. The government has managed to imbue national values and the ideal of social justice in its public policy. Tanjungbalai, as a consequence, serves as a positive precedent for other provinces on how social conflict can be mollified by putting a premium on security, tolerance and social justice through policy reform.

This transformation indicates that post-conflict political development is not merely about physical and economic reconstruction but also about social and cultural reconstruction. The government, security apparatus and civil society are collectively dedicated to peace and the non-polarization of the society. These measures are promoting progress in the southwestern Sumatran city of Tanjungbalai, where leaders of a more stable, democratic local politics focused on human priorities and community relations are emerging.

4. CONCLUSION

Ethnic and political relations among the people of Tanjungbalai Kota Subdistrict, Tanjungbalai Selatan District, following the 2016 conflict show that ethnic relations in Tanjungbalai have improved significantly. Although the conflict that occurred in 2016 worsened relations between different ethnic groups in Tanjungbalai, efforts made by the government and local communities have succeeded in restoring ethnic relations in Tanjungbalai. The improvement in ethnic relations can now be seen from several indicators, such as increased communication and dialogue between different ethnic groups, increased cooperation and joint activities between different ethnic groups, and decreased tension and conflict between different ethnic groups. After all, even though they have different religions, they must help each other. The Chinese community no longer feels anxiety or fear year after year after the incident.

From 2017 to 2025, they have held many celebrations, such as their big day (Chinese New Year), balloon flights, and other celebrations, as well as Eid al-Fitr and Christmas celebrations. The ethnic communities in Tanjungbalai work together to maintain this. From an ethnic and religious perspective, relations in Tanjung Balai have been quite good since the incident, with tolerance in Tanjung Balai being strictly maintained. Not only that, political developments also had a significant influence on the incident, but after the conflict in 2016, political developments in Tanjung Balai have also been very good to date. The police were very quick to respond to the conflict. In the 2024 presidential election, the ethnic communities in Tanjung Balai came together to cast their votes. Despite differing preferences in voting for the President and Vice President, the ethnic communities in Tanjung Balai did not harbour any feelings of jealousy. This indicates that ethnic relations in politics are very good, and in fact, the ethnic communities in Tanjung Balai support one another.

Ethical Approval

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of academic research in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Sumatera Utara. Ethical approval was not required as the study involved non-experimental, interview-based qualitative data and did not include personal or medical information that could harm participants. All data were collected with full respect for participants' privacy and confidentiality.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants were informed about the objectives of this study prior to the interviews. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that the information provided would be used solely for academic and research purposes.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, MBS; methodology, MBS; data collection, MBS; validation, IF; formal analysis, MBS writing original draft preparation, MBS writing review and editing, IF.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Disclosure Statement

The author(s) has/have not declared any potential conflicts of interest. The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be perceived as a potential conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The interview data contributing to the findings of this study that are qualitative may be accessed from the lead author on request. Because of privacy and confidentiality issues, the raw data are not made available to the public.

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