

Indonesia's national motto

Unity in diversity

Matteo Rebecchi

Matteo Rebecchi, an Italian Xaverian missionary now living in the Philippines, carried out his mission in Indonesia from 1999 to 2017, first in the Mentawai Islands and then in the formation of young Xaverians in Jakarta. It was in Indonesia, in that context, that his interest in working for interreligious dialogue developed and deepened.

Indonesia is an archipelago of more than seventeen thousand islands in Southeast Asia. With 275 million inhabitants, it has the largest Muslim population of any country in the world. With the proclamation of Indonesia's independence from the Netherlands in 1945, President Sukarno declared *Pancasila* as the foundation of the nation and its constitution. The expression derives from Sanskrit and means "five (*bench*) principles (*sila*)".

The first of these principles is *Belief in the one and only God* (in Indonesian: *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*). This speaks to the unique nature of Indonesia, which on the one hand does not have a state religion, while at the same time the country does not recognize itself as secular. Every citizen must have a religious affiliation. By its nature, this *sila* is therefore foundational for freedom of worship and equal dignity for all faithful of the six religions currently recognized by the State: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity and Confucianism. Radical groups, however, have still demanded enforcement of *sharia* law, which since the early 2000s has been gradually introduced into the penal code in the autonomous region of Aceh.

The second *sila* is *Justice and Human Civilization* (*Kemanusiaan Yang Adil dan Beradab*). This principle expresses the project of a just society, one based on personal rights and responsibilities. It is the basis for egalitarian relationships, equal dignity, the fight against poverty, and respect for human dignity. Unfortunately, the evident distance between rich and poor, and diverse forms of discrimination in a country that would have the resources to offer widespread well-being, make this only a partially fulfilled principle.

The third principle, *Unity of Indonesia* (*Persatuan Indonesia*), declares political unity of the archipelago despite profound ethnic, cultural and even religious differences of the peoples within the country. This desire is also expressed by the motto of the national emblem, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity). One strong element of cultural

unification is the wise choice of a common language (*Bahasa Indonesia*) since the beginning of the independence movement. This language is commonly accepted and now universally known throughout the country. As early as 1928, in the Oath of Youth or *Sumpah Pemuda, Bahasa Indonesia*, it was chosen as the national language from a number of options. In fact, in this same period an anti-colonial congress had sanctioned three fundamental ideas: a single homeland, a single nation and a unifying language.

The fourth principle is *Democracy guided by inner wisdom by means of the consent of representatives* (*Kerakyatan Yang Dipimpin oleh Hikmat Kebijaksanaan, Dalam Permusyawaratan Perwakilan*). It is the democratic principle that accords with Indonesian cultural traditions, oriented by inner values and a strong spiritual reference. The democratic process is also guided by the exercise of *musyawarah*, through which the exchange of ideas should lead to the consensus of parties involved, in order to identify the best solution to respond to the challenge at hand. It is not merely a deliberation among representatives, but a dialogic process that should favor the achievement of a unanimous vision. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that the principle of *musyawarah*, well rooted in many ethnic cultures, is applied to discussions of concrete problems in society at the local level, but there is still a struggle in its application at the highest levels.

The fifth sila is *Social Justice for All Indonesian People* (*Keadilan Sosial bagi seluruh Rakyat Indonesia*). Studies indicate that "social justice" may have been borrowed by Sukarno after reading the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), during his exile in Ende, Flores (Indonesia) between 1934 and 1938. It was a period in which the future president of Indonesia had access to the library of the Verbite missionaries.¹ This stood as an alternative to dominant ideologies of Marxism and liberalism of the time and was more in harmony with Indonesia's choice to position itself among non-aligned countries. But despite efforts to alleviate poverty and achieve stable economic growth, even this principle remains only a partially achieved ideal. The famous Indonesian priest and writer Mangunwijaya complained of this in his novel, *Burung-burung Rantau*. Unhappy with the illusory freedom obtained through independence from colonial powers, he stated that "the [true] homeland is the place where battles against exploitation are fought, and the battlefield is transformed into peace [...]. It is the place where humankind is humanized, and where everyone sacrifices him or herself generously. Today's patriotism is solidarity with those who are weak, small, poor, and exploited."

¹ Chrisyantia, Karina, "Ada Apa dengan Soekarno of Hende?", in "Hidup Katolik", May 31, 2020. See: <https://www.hidupkatolik.com/2020/05/31/45532/ada-apa-dengan-soekarno-di-ende.php>.