

NEGOTIATING THE RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT OVER THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GKPI CHURCH IN LOHSARI HAMLET, PERLABIAN VILLAGE, KAMPUNG RAKYAT DISTRICT, SOUTH LABUHANBATU REGENCY (2016–2023)

Fahrizal Putra Pulungan ^{a*)}, Irwansyah ^{a)}

^{a)} Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

^{*)}Corresponding Author: fahrizal0604223023@uinsu.ac.id

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Abstract. Conflicts over the establishment of places of worship remain a recurring social issue in Indonesia's multicultural societies, including the conflict regarding the construction of the Gereja Kristen Protestan Indonesia (GKPI) church in Lohsari Hamlet, Kampung Rakyat District, South Labuhanbatu Regency. This study aims to analyze the negotiation process in resolving the conflict over the establishment of the GKPI church and to identify the actors, strategies, and factors that influence the success of the negotiation process. This research employs a qualitative approach with data collection techniques including in-depth interviews, observation, and documentary analysis. The results show that the negotiation process involved various parties, including church administrators, community leaders, religious leaders, the village government, and security officials. The negotiations were conducted through dialogue, deliberation, and mediation by emphasizing the principles of tolerance, compliance with regulations, and efforts to maintain social stability. Although the process faced several obstacles, such as differences in perceptions and interests among the parties involved, the negotiation process was able to prevent the conflict from escalating and create opportunities for compromise. This study concludes that inclusive negotiation based on participatory communication plays an important role in resolving conflicts related to the establishment of places of worship in pluralistic societies.

Keywords: Conflict negotiation; Church establishment; Religious tolerance; Conflict resolution; GKPI

I. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts over the establishment of places of worship have been a critical issue in post-Reformation Indonesia, with 198 cases recorded between 2016 and 2023. Article 28E and Article 29 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia guarantee citizens' fundamental rights to build places of worship in Indonesia. However, in practice, the construction of places of worship—particularly churches—often triggers social tensions within diverse communities. In South Labuhanbatu, where the population is predominantly Muslim (92%), plans to establish a GKPI church in Lohsari Village have faced opposition since 2016 due to concerns over demographics and local identity (Rosdiana et al., 2025). This conflict involved demonstrations, boycotts, and protracted negotiations leading up to its resolution in 2023. This situation demonstrates that the implementation of religious freedom at the local level still faces various social obstacles. In this context, negotiation serves as a crucial approach because it facilitates dialogue among conflicting parties to peacefully find common ground (Sabranayah & Irwansyah, 2025).

Negotiation is one of the methods frequently employed in resolving religion-based social disputes, as it emphasizes conversation and discussion as a means of reaching a mutual consensus. Negotiation also plays a vital role as a process of interaction between conflicting parties to find a peaceful resolution without resorting to violence (Perdana & Irwansyah, 2019). In the context of disputes over the construction of places of worship, the participation of local governments and the Forum for Interfaith Harmony (FKUB) plays a vital role as mediators to reconcile the interests of the disputing parties (Sumitro et al., 2023). Negotiation plays a crucial role in disputes over church construction, as structured discussions allow each party to openly express their aspirations, objections, and interests, thereby fostering mutual understanding. Through this process, the resulting solution is expected not only to resolve the existing conflict but also to maintain interfaith harmony and foster harmonious social relations within the community. Furthermore, negotiation enables the achievement of a fair agreement acceptable to all parties, thereby minimizing the potential for future conflicts (Al Azis & Irwansyah, 2021).

The dispute over the construction of a church in Lohsari Hamlet, Parlabian Village, Kampung Rakyat Subdistrict, South Labuhanbatu Regency, which took place from 2016 to 2023, illustrates the complexity of religious conflicts occurring at the local community level. This conflict arose due to differing views within the community regarding the legitimacy of the church's construction, as well as concerns among some residents about the potential social impacts of the place of worship's presence (Ferdiansyah et al., 2023). Furthermore, the lack of communication and meaningful interaction between the church and the surrounding community prolonged the conflict resolution process, due to the absence of an open space for dialogue to foster mutual understanding of each party's interests (Halim & Mubarak, 2021). These conditions indicate that religious conflicts are not solely influenced by regulatory or permitting factors, but also by social dynamics, communication, and the level of trust among community groups. Therefore, an active role is needed from local governments, religious leaders, and institutions such as the Forum for Interfaith Harmony (FKUB) in facilitating a constructive and sustainable dialogue process. It is hoped that regular and open dialogue will foster mutual understanding, strengthen tolerance, and prevent similar conflicts from arising in the future, thereby creating a harmonious and peaceful community despite differences in religious backgrounds (Mayyasya et al., 2022).

Several studies have revealed that disputes over the construction of places of worship are often exacerbated by the government's lack of efforts to educate the public about regulations. Residents' lack of understanding of the regulations governing the construction of places of worship can lead to miscommunication and opposition at the local level (Malik & Kushidayati, 2026). Furthermore, feelings of religious identity and social stereotypes also act as barriers in the process of resolving religion-based conflicts. For example, research conducted by Silaen et al. (2025) on conflicts surrounding the construction of a church in West Java showed that public opposition was influenced not only by administrative issues related to permits but also by a lack of outreach regarding regulations on the establishment of places of worship and a lack of dialogue between church representatives and local residents. The study's findings indicate that when local governments, community leaders, and religious leaders are involved in mediation and open dialogue, tensions can gradually subside, leading to an agreement acceptable to all parties. Similar findings were also reported in Wijayanto's (2021) study, which examined conflicts over the construction of places of worship in North Sumatra. This study confirms that a negotiation process involving various stakeholders—such as local governments, traditional leaders, and the Forum for Interfaith Harmony (FKUB)—can create a more open space for communication, enabling communities to better understand each other's interests and concerns. Thus, a negotiation approach based on interfaith dialogue serves as an effective strategy for fostering trust, strengthening tolerance, and preventing similar conflicts within a multicultural society (Arifinsyah et al., 2021).

Based on the above explanation, this study focuses its analysis on the negotiation process to resolve the dispute over

the construction of a church in Lohsari Hamlet, Parlabian Village, Kampung Rakyat Subdistrict, South Labuhanbatu Regency, during the period 2016–2023. This study aims to examine the causes of the conflict, the negotiation steps implemented, and the contributions of the parties involved in resolving the issue. Studies on the resolution of religious conflicts at the local level are considered crucial as a foundation for formulating policies that promote interfaith harmony.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method employed in this study utilizes a qualitative approach with a case study strategy, as the primary focus is to understand the negotiation process—as an effort to resolve complex social conflicts—in the case of the establishment of the GKPI Church in Lohsari Hamlet in a thorough and contextual manner (Simarmata et al., 2024). Qualitative research allows researchers to explore the perspectives of various parties involved in the conflict, including local residents, church representatives, village officials, and interfaith representatives, through data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and the documentation of official records as well as news reports related to similar conflicts in Indonesia (Putri et al., 2023). This approach aligns with other studies on conflicts over the construction of places of worship that use case studies to comprehensively explore the social context, motivations, and dynamics of interactions among groups in such conflicts (Socius, 2025).

Data analysis was conducted thematically through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions to identify effective negotiation patterns in reaching a peaceful agreement between the disputing parties (Panjaitan, 2024). This method aligns with research practices on religion-based social conflicts, which largely rely on descriptive qualitative approaches to capture the social and cultural nuances in nonviolent conflict resolution (Al Mufida et al., 2025). In addition, the researcher will also compare field findings with the latest academic literature on conflict resolution and negotiation in conflicts over the construction of places of worship in Indonesia, which highlights the complexity of the mediation process and the role of negotiation in the peaceful resolution of religious conflicts (Simarmata et al., 2024).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Social Context and Conflict Dynamics Surrounding the Construction of the GKPI Church

Lohsari Hamlet, Parlabian Village, Kampung Rakyat Subdistrict is a rural area in South Labuhanbatu Regency with a population of approximately 1,200 people of diverse religious backgrounds, dominated by Christians (GKPI) and Muslims. Most residents work as farmers and small-scale traders, and social relations have historically been harmonious. This relatively peaceful community life began to change when plans emerged to build a GKPI church in the area. The plan to construct the church, located near residential areas, sparked various reactions from the community. The situation was

exacerbated by a public outreach process that some residents perceived as lacking transparency, leading to misunderstandings and suspicion regarding the church's construction objectives. Furthermore, the relatively remote geographical location of the Lohsari hamlet () and the community's limited access to information have further increased the potential for miscommunication between the church and the local community (Latifah et al., 2025; Wijaya, 2025).

The conflict over the construction of the GKPI Church in Lohsari Hamlet is influenced by various interrelated factors. From an administrative perspective, the church construction is deemed not to have met all licensing requirements, particularly the provisions set forth in the Joint Ministerial Decree (SKB) regarding the establishment of places of worship. This situation has led some community members to believe that the construction lacks a sufficient legal basis. In addition to administrative issues, some residents viewed the construction site as potentially disrupting the settlement's spatial planning and the comfort of the surrounding environment. On the other hand, ineffective communication during the initial public outreach phase led to perceptions of injustice and mistrust among the community. The accumulation of these various factors prompted some residents to stage a peaceful protest at the South Labuhanbatu Regency Ministry of Religious Affairs office in December 2023 as a means of voicing their concerns regarding the church construction plan. Differing views regarding the community's right to voice objections and the congregation's right to establish a house of worship further prolonged the conflict dynamics before a resolution was reached through mediation (Firdaus et al., 2023; Fitriani & Siregar, 2021).

Efforts to resolve the conflict were subsequently undertaken through a negotiation process involving various stakeholders. The South Labuhanbatu Regency government, together with the Forum for Interfaith Harmony (FKUB), acted as a neutral mediator by facilitating a series of open dialogues between religious leaders, community leaders, representatives of the church congregation, and members of the public who both supported and opposed the church's construction (Bessie & Luj, 2025). During these negotiations, discussions focused on clarifying the permitting procedures, exploring potential alternative locations, and adjusting the construction schedule to ensure it was acceptable to all parties. The government's presence as an official mediator provided legal certainty while also enhancing public trust in the conflict resolution process. The results of the dialogue demonstrated that a consultative approach involving all parties openly was able to ease social tensions, improve intergroup communication, and foster a shared understanding in maintaining religious harmony in Lohsari Hamlet (Risky et al., 2026; Yorman et al., 2025).

The conflict that occurred in Lohsari Hamlet cannot be understood merely as an issue regarding the construction of a house of worship, but also as a social event influenced by intergroup relations within a community. Rural communities generally have strong social bonds and patterns of interaction shaped by long-standing shared living experiences. When a development plan emerges that is perceived as having the

potential to alter the local environment, communities tend to respond based on collective experience, a sense of ownership of the area, and the interest in maintaining harmony in daily life (Hasibuan et al., 2025).

The religious diversity found in Lohsari Hamlet is actually an important form of social capital in building community life. For years, people from various religious backgrounds have been able to carry out their activities side by side without significant conflict. This situation indicates that differences in religious beliefs are not the primary cause of the tensions that have arisen. Problems began to emerge when the process of communicating information regarding the church's construction was not fully understood by all residents, leading to various differing interpretations. It was these differing interpretations that subsequently gave rise to mutual suspicion among some members of the community (Geubrina et al., 2025).

In addition to communication, public perceptions of legal procedures also have a significant influence on the dynamics of the conflict. Some residents believe that any construction of public facilities, including places of worship, must comply with all applicable regulations before construction begins. This view stems from the public's desire for all construction activities to proceed in an orderly, transparent manner and in accordance with applicable regulations. On the other hand, church congregants view the construction of places of worship as part of fulfilling the right to worship guaranteed by the constitution. This difference in perspective demonstrates that the conflict arises from differing interpretations of the rights and obligations of each party.

The dynamics of the conflict also highlight the importance of public trust in every decision-making process. Public trust is built not only through the final outcomes achieved but also through a process that involves transparency of information and opportunities for all parties to express their opinions. When residents feel involved in discussions regarding an issue, the potential for resistance tends to be minimized. Conversely, if there are groups that feel they are not receiving adequate information, the scope for misunderstandings to arise becomes greater (Hutagalung & Sazali, 2024).

The negotiation process facilitated by the local government and the Forum for Interfaith Harmony demonstrates that dialogue is an effective approach to mitigating social conflict. Dialogue forums provide an opportunity for each party to openly explain their respective reasons, interests, and expectations. Through direct communication, various pieces of information that previously circulated only as assumptions can be clarified together. This situation helps create a more conducive atmosphere, allowing discussions to focus on finding solutions acceptable to all parties.

The involvement of religious and community leaders also makes a significant contribution to the conflict resolution process. Both groups wield strong influence over public opinion because they are viewed as figures who understand local social and cultural conditions. Their presence serves not only to convey the aspirations of the community but also to act as a communication bridge between residents, the government, and the church. This role helps reduce misunderstandings and fosters a more open and mutually

respectful atmosphere for deliberation (Hartani & Nulhaqim, 2020; Saraswati & Anas, 2023).

The experience of conflict resolution in Lohsari Hamlet demonstrates that community harmony requires a shared commitment built through communication, respect for the rule of law, and appreciation for diversity. Every issue that arises in community life has distinct characteristics, so its resolution requires an approach that prioritizes dialogue and the involvement of all stakeholders. Social harmony is easier to maintain when every group is given equal space to express their views, listen to the opinions of others, and participate in formulating joint decisions.

B. Negotiation Strategies and Their Impact on Conflict Resolution

The conflict over the establishment of the GKPI church in Lohsari Hamlet was resolved through the application of negotiation strategies that prioritized dialogue, deliberation, and the involvement of various segments of the community. The strategy employed not only focused on resolving conflicting interests but was also aimed at rebuilding trust between the church congregation and the community that had expressed opposition (Al Aziz & Irwansyah, 2021). The South Labuhanbatu Regency government, together with the Forum for Interfaith Harmony (FKUB), facilitated a community-based mediation process by bringing together religious leaders, community leaders, village government officials, and representatives from both sides in an open dialogue forum. Through this mechanism, each party was given an equal opportunity to express their views, concerns, and proposed solutions, ensuring that the negotiation process was participatory and grounded in the principle of mutual respect (Millah, 2023).

One of the key strategies in the negotiation process is finding compromises on the issues that are the source of community objections. Discussions not only address the completeness of the permitting procedures but also consider adjustments to the construction site and the construction schedule to avoid disrupting the activities of the surrounding community. The willingness of both parties to accommodate each other's interests results in a mutually acceptable compromise (Sabranayah & Irwansyah, 2025). One form of compromise agreed upon was changing the church's construction site from the original plan and adjusting the construction timeline to align with the local community's environmental conditions. This approach demonstrates that conflict resolution is more easily achieved when each party is willing to make adjustments without disregarding their respective rights (Rosdiana et al., 2025).

The success of the negotiation process was also influenced by the involvement of community leaders as informal facilitators who bridged communication between residents, the government, and church representatives. The presence of community leaders provided residents with a sense of security to voice their concerns while also helping to clarify various pieces of information that had not previously been fully understood. Religious leaders also play a role in fostering an understanding of the importance of maintaining harmonious coexistence amid diversity (Sumitro et al., 2023). The synergy

between formal mediators and local leaders creates a more open atmosphere for dialogue, ensuring that the conflict resolution process proceeds in a conducive manner and reduces the potential for new misunderstandings to arise.

The gradual negotiation process had a positive impact on the social life of the Lohsari hamlet community. Tensions that had previously arisen due to differing views on the church's construction began to subside following the mutual agreement. Intergroup communication became more open, allowing social relationships that had previously been strained to gradually be restored. The community began to reengage in various joint activities within the village, while interactions between residents and the church congregation took place in a more conducive atmosphere. These conditions demonstrate that conflict resolution through dialogue can reinvigorate social relationships that had previously been disrupted.

In addition to improving relations among residents, the outcome of the negotiations also reinforced the role of the Forum for Interfaith Harmony (FKUB) as an institution with a strategic function in maintaining interfaith harmony. The FKUB's success in facilitating communication and building mutual understanding among the parties increased public trust in conflict resolution mechanisms that prioritize deliberation. This experience demonstrates that conflict resolution through a peaceful approach can yield agreements that are more widely accepted by all parties compared to confrontational resolutions. The community has also come to understand that any differences in interests can be resolved through open communication and respect for applicable regulations (Putri et al., 2023; Simarmata et al., 2024).

The findings of this study offer several implications for public policy implementation, particularly regarding the management of places of worship in areas with religious diversity. Local governments must ensure that every construction process begins with open public outreach regarding permitting procedures, site selection, and the project's impact on the surrounding community. The involvement of the FKUB or a neutral mediator is also crucial from the early stages to facilitate communication among all stakeholders. Such a participatory approach can reduce misunderstandings while building public trust in the policies adopted.

The results of this study also indicate that community-based negotiation is an effective approach for resolving social conflicts related to the construction of places of worship. The experience of conflict resolution in Lohsari Hamlet can serve as a reference for local governments and communities in other regions facing similar issues. Each stage of the negotiation process—from problem identification and dialogue to the implementation of agreements—must be systematically documented to serve as a basis for evaluation and learning. Such documentation can serve as a guide in designing conflict resolution strategies that are more adaptive to the social characteristics of the community and support the creation of a harmonious life amid diversity (Socius, 2025; Al Mufida et al., 2025).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that the conflict over the construction of the GKPI Church in Lohsari Hamlet, Parlbian Village, Kampung Rakyat Subdistrict, South Labuhanbatu Regency was influenced by various interrelated factors. The conflict was not solely caused by religious differences but also by administrative issues related to permits, the selection of the construction site, insufficient public outreach to the community, and differing perceptions regarding the rights and interests of each party. These conditions led to misunderstandings that escalated into opposition from some residents to the church construction plan.

The conflict resolution process was carried out through a negotiation strategy that prioritized dialogue, community-based mediation, and the involvement of various stakeholders, such as the local government, the Forum for Interfaith Harmony (FKUB), religious leaders, community leaders, as well as representatives of residents and the GKPI Church congregation. The negotiation process provided a space for all parties to voice their concerns, clarify various issues, and formulate mutually acceptable solutions. The resulting agreement—including adjustments to the location and the construction process—demonstrates that resolving conflicts through deliberation can reduce social tensions and rebuild harmonious relationships within a diverse community.

The research findings confirm that community-based negotiation is an effective approach to resolving social conflicts related to the construction of places of worship. The success of this process is evident not only in the agreement reached between the conflicting parties, but also in the increased public trust in dialogue mechanisms, the strengthened role of the FKUB as a mediator, and the restoration of social relations among communities. These findings highlight the importance of open communication, compliance with legal provisions, and the involvement of all stakeholders from the earliest stages as a means of maintaining harmony and preventing the emergence of similar conflicts.

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