

# Politics as a Tool of Power or *Diakonia*: Perspective of the Catholic Church

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## Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji politik dari perspektif Gereja Katolik sebagai diakonia (pelayanan), bukan semata-mata sebagai instrumen kekuasaan. Latar belakang penelitian ini berangkat dari realitas politik Indonesia yang masih ditandai oleh praktik korupsi, penyalahgunaan wewenang, dan politik transaksional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan pandangan Gereja Katolik tentang politik sebagai panggilan moral serta relevansinya dalam konteks Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi pustaka. Dalam pengumpulan data, peneliti menganalisis literatur ilmiah serta dokumen ajaran sosial Gereja. Proses pengumpulan data diawali dengan identifikasi sumber-sumber yang relevan, seperti ajaran Gereja dan karya-karya ilmiah lainnya, yang diperoleh melalui penelusuran pustaka secara langsung maupun daring. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Gereja memandang partisipasi politik sebagai tanggung jawab etis untuk melayani, membela martabat manusia, dan memperjuangkan keadilan sosial. Kekuasaan dipahami sebagai mandat, bukan sebagai privilese pribadi. Perspektif ini relevan sebagai landasan moral dalam memperkuat integritas, partisipasi warga, serta praktik demokrasi yang lebih adil, partisipatif, dan berorientasi pada kebaikan bersama.

**Kata kunci:** *politik; diakonia; Gereja Katolik; kebaikan bersama; etika publik.*

### **Abstract**

This study examines politics from the perspective of the Catholic Church as *diakonia* (service), not merely as an instrument of power. The background of this study stems from the reality of Indonesian politics, which is still marked by corruption, abuse of authority, and transactional politics. This study aimed to explain the Catholic Church's view of politics as a moral calling and its relevance to the Indonesian context. This study used qualitative research with a literature approach. In collecting the data, the researcher analyzed the scientific literature and Church social teaching documents. The data collection process in this study began with identifying relevant sources, such as Church teachings and other scholarly works. These sources were obtained through both direct library research and online searches. The results of the study showed that the Church views political participation as an ethical responsibility to serve, defend human dignity, and fight for social justice. Power is understood as a mandate rather than a personal privilege. This perspective is relevant as a moral foundation for strengthening integrity, citizen participation, and democratic practices that are more just, participatory, and oriented towards the common good.

**Keywords:** *politics; diakonia; Catholic Church; common good; public ethics.*

### **Introduction**

Politics is essentially understood as an effort to create the common good, as implied by its root meaning, polis, or city-state. In such a state, people interact with one another to create mutual prosperity (Ramadhani et al., 2022). In the view of classical Greek philosophers, politics is closely related to human education, even from an early age (Wibowo, 2017). Politics has long attracted the attention of many people. In Indonesia, politics is highly salient because the government consistently campaigns for progress, yet the reality after elections does not align with its promises. The public is sometimes confused and criticizes the government for its poor performance.

In an unstable state system, politics is often used as a tool of power. This power is used by certain officials to obtain additional privileges, even though power is understood as the capacity a person possesses to exercise it in

accordance with the authority granted (Salsabilah & Putri, 2022). For the positive targets, many people also understand power as the ability to achieve certain goals (Rizkiyani & Mujab, 2024). One form of deviation in politics is corruption. The actions clearly provide personal or group benefits. Therefore, it is true that Indonesia is still fighting corrupt officials (Setiawan & Fauzi, 2019).

When someone becomes a politician, what is expected is their service. Judging from its meaning, politics is more appropriately seen as a tool for serving the community. The word “serve” has a very broad meaning. The term deacon comes from the Greek word *diakonos* (διάκονος), which is generally translated as servant, or more specifically, table servant. Literally, diakonia means the act of helping or performing service. In Hebrew, this concept is equivalent to the word *syeret*, which means to serve. In Greek tradition, this term developed into several forms, namely diakonia (service), *diakonein* (to serve), and *diakonos/diaken* (servant) (Arifianto, 2020).

Nordegtraaf explains the meaning of diakonia through five terms that describe the various dimensions of service. First, *douleuein*, which means to serve as a servant or slave. It emphasizes the servant's dependence on the one being served. Second, *latreuein*, which means to serve in exchange for something in return, with the noun form *latreia* also used in the context of religious worship. In the New Testament, this term refers to service to God, not to human relationships. Romans 12:1 explains that *logikē latreia* is the true worship, which is to offer oneself completely to God. Third, *leitourgein* refers to public service for the welfare of society and the state. Fourth, *therapeuein*, which emphasizes the willingness to serve as well as possible. Finally, *huperetein* describes a working relationship in which servants carry out tasks according to the instructions of those who give orders. Thus, the concept of

*diakonia* encompasses a broad meaning of service, including the dimensions of submission, religious devotion, social responsibility, personal readiness, and obedience in carrying out tasks (Noordegraaf & Sahetapy-Angel, 2004).

In Indonesia, the politics also face many challenges. The ideal political principles often conflict with the actual situation, revealing a substantial gap between theory and practice. This raises a critical question: Is politics being utilized as a tool for wielding power, or is it genuinely aimed at serving the community? If politics is used as a tool of power that does not prioritize the needs of the public, then such actions are wrong because they are contrary to the purpose of politics itself. Previous research conducted by Taryudi shows that power in politics is influenced by knowledge because it has a very strong relationship with power. The power in Indonesia can be described in three eras, namely the old order, the new order, and the reform era (Taryudi & Setiawan, 2021). A similar study was conducted by Aliano and Adon. They focused on Indonesian politics through the 2024 elections using Michel Foucault's perspective. Their research explains that there is a complex relationship between power and knowledge. Based on the 2024 elections that they observed, knowledge is used to support the interests of those in power (Aliano & Adon, 2023). In addition, politicians who serve as government officials and use politics as a power tend to end up engaging in corruption, and their authority is improperly used (Puanandini et al., 2025).

Existing studies show different focuses, but they are still within the framework of politics and power. In general, these studies show how politics is misused without regard for the main objectives of politics itself. This study presents a different focus and a new idea, namely, how politics should be used as a tool to serve. This new idea is based on the teachings of the Catholic Church. This study is urgent because the attitude of exploiting politics for

personal gain is considered normal. In fact, corruption and the misuse of politics are problems that must be solved. Politics is not just a position, but also must be interpreted positively so that more people can feel the benefits of politics. Based on the background above, this study aims to answer the following questions: (1) How does the Catholic Church see politics as a *diakonia*? (2) What is the relevance of the Church's teachings to Indonesian politics today?

## **Method**

This study applies a qualitative method with a literature approach. According to John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, qualitative research is a process that places researchers directly in the reality of life to understand and interpret the phenomena being studied. This approach presents the empirical world in various forms of representation, such as field notes, interview results, conversations, visual documentation, recordings, and reflective memos. Thus, qualitative researchers seek to examine phenomena in their natural context to gain a deep understanding or interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Literature study is a kind of qualitative research, as it contains the analysis of various relevant previous studies that served as the theoretical and conceptual basis for the research being conducted (Agustini et al., 2024). In this study, the researcher used various sources, including books, scientific journals, and Catholic Church teachings. These sources are accessed both online and offline.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Politics in the Perspective of Catholic Teaching**

All human abilities and authority do not just appear out of nowhere. The Catholic Church believes that there is only one almighty being, namely the

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Holy Trinity. God's authority is given to humans, albeit not completely. The authority in question is the responsibility of every civil society to maintain institutions and promote the interests of all members. As stated in *Rerum Novarum* (John XXIII, 1963b article 32) and *Pacem in Terris* (John XXIII, 1963a article 46). *Pacem in Terris* calls for relations between nations and individuals to be governed not by armed force, but by the principles of reason, truth, justice, and sincere and genuine cooperation (Pope Francis, 2023)

Individual freedom and responsibility must be reflected in politics that respect personal freedom. In politics, it is not permitted to use power to intimidate others. The government officials should give freedom to the people. A coerced society is not a humane society (John XXIII, 1963a, article 34). The Church values a true democratic system because it allows for citizen participation, accountability of leaders, and peaceful change. However, authentic democracy requires a foundation of law, moral education, and a correct concept of man. Without absolute truth, democracy can turn into veiled totalitarianism. The Church does not encourage or support the formation of groups that use power for their own interests (John Paul II, 1991, article 46).

During the Second Vatican Council, particularly in the pastoral constitution of the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et Spes*, the cooperation of all people in public life and the relationship between the state and the Church were explained. The Church always prioritizes the common good over personal interests. *Gaudium et Spes* explains this as follows:

*“They should recognize that although their views may differ from one another, they are nonetheless reasonable in terms of how to manage worldly affairs, and they should continue to respect their fellow citizens who sincerely defend those views, including as*

*members of political parties. Political parties are obliged to support everything that they believe is necessary for the common good. However, personal gain must never be prioritized over the common good.” (Gaudium et Spes, 1965 article 75)*

Based on the teachings of the Church, Catholics are called to be actively involved in politics as a form of religious duty by forming their conscience. They must serve the common good, respect legitimate differences of opinion, and oppose injustice. St. Thomas Aquinas viewed politics as *unitas ordinis* (unity of order) that reflects intrinsic goodness, similar to the unity of God, in which politics has autonomous integrity, but it is open to theological dimensions (McCormick, 2023). Some contemporaries discussed the possibility of an ideal Catholic confessional state, in which the state serves the common good that is open to the Church's eschatology, but without direct subordination (Keating, 2023).

The Catholic Church teaches that participation in political life is a moral obligation (USCCB, 2007) rooted in the baptism of Christians to promote the common good, protect human dignity, and serve the weak and vulnerable. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' paper *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* emphasizes that politics is a noble calling that must be led by a well-formed conscience rather than partisan interests or ideology. The Church does not endorse any political party, but encourages its faithful to bring Gospel principles into the public sphere.

Pope Pius XI, in *Non Abbiamo Bisogno*, emphasized that Catholic Action is not a political party, but the participation of the laity with the Apostolic hierarchy outside of partisan politics (Pius XI, 1931). Pope Benedict XVI emphasized the separation of Church and state. The Church is not a state or part of it, but rather a community based on faith that contributes to justice

and peace without replacing the state (Strand & Conedera, 2020). If democracy is consistent with natural law and the teachings of the Gospel, the Church supports it as a valid system of government. Nonetheless, Catholics should not keep their private convictions apart from their public behavior. For instance, it is deemed illogical to be personally against abortion but politically in favor of its access (Roniger, 2023). The Catholic Church consistently views politics as a means of service, *diakonia*.

### **The political reality in Indonesia**

The contemporary political landscape in Indonesia reflects a complex dynamic, characterized by the interplay between post-reform democratic consolidation and signs of regression in the quality of democratic practices. Normatively, Indonesia is a constitutional democracy grounded in Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, where sovereignty resides in the people and is exercised through relatively open and competitive electoral mechanisms. Political reforms since 1998 have fostered a more inclusive political system, marked by the circulation of power, press freedom, and an expanding space for civil society participation (*KPU Kab-Mamberamotengah - Menatap Masa Depan Demokrasi Indonesia*, 2025).

However, recent developments indicate a declining trend in the quality of democracy. Reports from international institutions such as the Economist Intelligence Unit note that Indonesia's democracy index has decreased, with a score of approximately 6.44 and a declining global ranking (ilmuhukum.uin-suka.ac.id, 2025). This phenomenon suggests that while democratic procedures remain in place, the substantive dimensions of democracy, such as civil liberties, accountability, and the rule of law, are under significant strain.

One of the most pressing issues in Indonesia's contemporary political reality is the weakening of civil liberties and the increasing prevalence of

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repressive responses to criticism. Various reports highlight restrictions on freedom of expression, including harsh state responses to public demonstrations and rising intimidation against activists and journalists (Firyalfatin, 2025). Moreover, recent cases of violence against human rights activists have raised concerns about the shrinking democratic space and the intensification of political intimidation (Widiyanto, 2026).

At the same time, corruption and patronage politics remain serious challenges. Indonesia's declining position in the Corruption Perceptions Index indicates a weakening of oversight and transparency mechanisms, alongside the persistence of nepotistic practices within power structures (FHUI, 2026). This reinforces the argument that Indonesia's democracy has not yet fully achieved a substantive form, but rather remains in a transitional phase vulnerable to distortions of power.

Another defining feature of Indonesia's political reality is the growing public dissatisfaction with political elites. Waves of protests in 2025, driven by economic inequality and perceptions of elite privilege, reflect an increasing gap between the government and the broader society (TIME, 2025). The state's relatively repressive response to these protests further underscores the tension between political stability and the protection of citizens' democratic rights. In addition, from an institutional perspective, the dynamics of electoral law reform reveal a tendency for political change to occur more through judicial channels than through deliberative legislative processes. This indicates an imbalance in the system of checks and balances among state institutions (FHUI, 2026).

Indonesia's current political reality can be understood as a paradox of democracy: on the one hand, there are notable achievements in maintaining democratic procedures such as elections and formal institutions; on the other

hand, the quality of substantive democracy faces serious challenges, including the erosion of civil liberties, rising corruption, and increasing authoritarian tendencies. Therefore, the future of Indonesia's democracy largely depends on the capacity of both the state and civil society to strengthen democratic institutions, uphold the rule of law, and safeguard public freedoms as the fundamental basis of a democratic political order.

### **Relevance to Current Indonesian Politics**

Based on the background and perspective of the Catholic Church, politics is fundamentally understood as a means to realize *bonum commune*, or the common good (Eschmann, 1943), not as an instrument of power domination. However, the political reality in Indonesia shows a deviation from this essence. Politics is often reduced to an arena for the pursuit of influence, personal interests, and the accumulation of material gains, which is evident in the practices of corruption, abuse of power, and transactional political culture (Pagala & SHI, 2021). This situation highlights the gap between normative political concepts and actual practices in the field. In this context, the Catholic Church's idea of politics as *diakonia* or service is highly relevant because it offers an ethical correction to exploitative power mentalities. Therefore, it is also important to build a young generation that cares about politics. Young Catholics also need to prepare themselves to enter the political arena, both through education and practical politics (Abraham, 2025).

Understanding politics as *diakonia* places public office within a moral responsibility to serve the community, especially the weak and vulnerable groups (Jegalus, 2020). A Church that engages in politics must do so in the name of the Church itself, rather than in the name of any individual (Abraham, 2026; Liliyawa, 2025). Power is no longer seen as a privilege, but as a mandate

that must be accounted for in the interests of the common good. This idea directly opposes the widespread corruption and power abuse that persist in Indonesia. Thus, the teachings of the Church provide an ethical foundation for strengthening integrity, transparency, and accountability in governance (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992). Service-oriented politics requires leaders to prioritize honesty, fairness, and commitment to the welfare of the people, rather than the interests of groups or parties. The church values the democratic system because it enables community involvement, checks power, and fosters peaceful social change.

In the Indonesian context, this affirmation is particularly relevant given the continuing prevalence of political apathy, low civic literacy, and electoral pragmatism such as money politics. This religious perspective serves as a reminder that engaging in politics is not simply a personal right but also a moral obligation to pursue social justice. Thus, political education, social advocacy, and active participation in public institutions are important ways to foster critical engagement among believers, including young people.

Furthermore, an orientation toward the *bonum commune* also provides a reflective basis for addressing the challenges of identity politics that still loom large in Indonesia's democratic dynamics (Sujito, 2022). Polarization based on religion, ethnicity, or certain groups has the potential to undermine national unity and obscure the political goal of collective welfare. Church teachings that place the common good above sectoral interests demand an inclusive, dialogical, and solidary attitude. Politics should not be used to divide society, but rather should be a space for collaboration in the interests of justice and peace. The most fundamental relevance of this research lies in its emphasis on the formation of conscience. Political transformation cannot be achieved

through structural reform or legal regulation alone, but through the moral renewal of political actors and citizens.

The formation of a conscience with the values of truth, justice, and human dignity is the foundation for the birth of an ethical political culture (Surbakti, 2014). Within this framework, faith is not separated from civic responsibility but rather becomes a source of inspiration for more political practices. Theological reflections on politics as *diakonia* contribute both conceptually and practically to political renewal in Indonesia. Politics is understood not as a space for power struggles, but as a call to serve for the common good. This paradigm is relevant for building a more moral, participatory, and socially just democracy.

## **Conclusion**

Politics is essentially aimed to achieve the common good, but it is often reduced to a means of power struggle and abuse. The Catholic Church's perspective emphasizes that politics should be understood as *diakonia*, a call to service rooted in the moral responsibility to defend human dignity, fight for justice, and prioritize the common good. The Church's social teaching places political participation as an ethical obligation of the faithful, carried out through a formed conscience, integrity, and commitment to the value of truth. In the context of Indonesian politics, which is still marred by corruption, transactional politics, and citizen apathy, the paradigm of politics as service offers moral correction as well as a direction for renewal. As a result, politics is now viewed as a vehicle for establishing a more equitable, inclusive, and compassionate democracy rather than as an instrument of dominance.

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