

Regulating Religion and Expression in Indonesia: Blasphemy, Religious Authority, and the Transition from Article 156a(a) to Article 300

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Received: 2022-12-05; Revised: 2024-10-13; Accepted: 2025-04-12; Published: 2026-09-30

Abstract: Legal provisions regarding blasphemy and religion-related expression in Indonesia underwent a significant transition after Article 156a(a) of the old Criminal Code was replaced by Article 300 of the National Criminal Code. This study examines how that transition has altered the relationship between the protection of religion, religious authorities, and freedom of expression in Indonesia. The study employs a normative legal methodology, using both statutory and case-law approaches, through analysis of legislation, Constitutional Court decisions, a number of blasphemy cases, and relevant scholarly literature. The legal materials were analyzed using the principles of legality, legitimate purpose, necessity, and proportionality as reflected in the Siracusa Principles, while also taking into account international human rights standards regarding religious expression. The research findings indicate that the application of Article 156a(a) of the old Criminal Code relied heavily on judicial interpretation and religious authority in determining whether a particular expression could be categorized as blasphemy, thereby rendering the boundary between protected expression and criminal acts uncertain. Article 300 of the National Criminal Code marks a significant normative shift by shifting the focus of criminal protection from religion as an abstract object toward the protection of individuals, groups, or communities from hostility, hatred, violence, or discrimination based on religion or belief, and by explicitly exempting certain forms of objective, community-specific, and scientific expression from criminal liability. Nevertheless, the use of concepts that remain open to interpretation suggests that the effectiveness of the new framework will depend heavily on future judicial interpretations. This study contributes to the field of religion and law by demonstrating how criminal law reform reconfigures the relationship between religious authorities, state regulation, and freedom of expression, while also offering a framework for assessing whether the new regime can avoid the interpretive uncertainties present in the previous blasphemy laws.

Keywords: blasphemy law; freedom of expression; human rights; legal certainty; *Siracusa Principles*.

Abstrak: Pengaturan hukum penodaan agama dan ekspresi yang berkaitan dengan agama di Indonesia telah mengalami transisi hukum yang signifikan. Sebelum 2 Januari 2026, penuntutan pidana terhadap penodaan agama terutama didasarkan pada Pasal 156a Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana (KUHP) lama yang berasal dari Pasal 4 Undang-Undang Nomor 1/PNPS/1965. Setelah berlakunya Undang-Undang Nomor 1 Tahun 2023 tentang KUHP Nasional, Pasal 4 Undang-Undang Nomor 1/PNPS/1965 dan Pasal 156a KUHP lama tidak lagi berlaku, sedangkan Pasal 1–3 Undang-Undang Nomor 1/PNPS/1965 tetap berlaku. Kerangka hukum pidana yang berlaku saat ini terutama diatur dalam Bab VII KUHP Nasional, khususnya Pasal 300 sebagaimana diubah melalui Undang-Undang Nomor 1 Tahun 2026. Penelitian ini menganalisis persoalan normatif dalam rezim hukum penodaan agama sebelumnya, mengkaji implikasinya melalui sejumlah putusan pengadilan, serta menilai apakah kerangka hukum yang berlaku saat ini telah menjawab persoalan kepastian hukum dan kebebasan berekspresi yang muncul dalam rezim tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode

hukum normatif dengan pendekatan perundang-undangan dan pendekatan kasus, melalui analisis terhadap peraturan perundang-undangan, putusan pengadilan, dan literatur ilmiah, dengan *Siracusa Principles* sebagai kerangka analisis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Pasal 156a KUHP lama mengandung unsur-unsur yang luas dan tidak dirumuskan secara memadai sehingga penerapannya dalam kasus Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, Meiliana, dan Gafatar sangat bergantung pada interpretasi yudisial dan keagamaan. Pasal 300 yang berlaku saat ini menunjukkan perubahan normatif penting dengan mengarahkan larangan pidana terhadap permusuhan, kebencian, dan penghasutan terhadap orang atau kelompok berdasarkan agama atau kepercayaan, serta secara eksplisit mengecualikan bentuk ekspresi objektif, internal, dan ilmiah tertentu dari tindak pidana. Meskipun demikian, penggunaan konsep-konsep hukum yang masih terbuka menunjukkan bahwa persoalan legalitas, kebutuhan, dan proporsionalitas tetap relevan dalam interpretasi dan penerapannya pada masa mendatang. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi dengan menganalisis hukum penodaan agama di Indonesia sebagai transisi dari rezim Pasal 156a KUHP lama menuju KUHP Nasional, serta menawarkan *Siracusa Principles* sebagai kerangka untuk mengevaluasi pembatasan kebebasan berekspresi dalam kedua rezim tersebut.

Kata kunci: hukum penodaan agama; kebebasan berekspresi; hak asasi manusia; kepastian hukum; Prinsip-Prinsip *Siracusa*.

1. Introduction

Indonesia is one of the world's most religiously diverse countries, making the relationship between protecting religious life and respecting human rights a persistent legal and social challenge. One of the most controversial manifestations of this tension has been the enforcement of the blasphemy law. Records indicate that 122 blasphemy cases were prosecuted between 2014 and 2022, representing a substantial increase from 54 cases during the 2004–2013 period (Agder, 2023). This development demonstrates that blasphemy has not remained an isolated criminal-law issue but has become a broader constitutional and social concern affecting the governance of religious diversity in Indonesia.

The controversy is particularly significant because the regulation and prosecution of religion-related expression directly intersect with the protection of freedom of expression (Cox, 2020). On the one hand, the state has constitutional responsibilities to protect religious life, maintain public order, and prevent social conflict. On the other hand, freedom of expression constitutes a fundamental right guaranteed under Articles 28E and 28F of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights, Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), and Article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR). The difficulty lies not simply in recognizing these interests simultaneously, but in determining when and under what conditions the state may legitimately restrict religious expression without undermining constitutional and international human rights guarantees.

The legal framework governing blasphemy and religion-related expression in Indonesia has recently undergone a fundamental transition. Historically, criminal prosecutions for blasphemy were primarily based on Article 156a of the former Indonesian Criminal Code (*Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana* [KUHP]), which originated from Article 4 of Law No. 1/PNPS/1965. The provision criminalized public expressions or acts characterized as hostility, abuse, or blasphemy against a religion practiced in Indonesia, but it did not provide precise statutory definitions or objective criteria for these elements. This legal framework governed the major blasphemy cases examined in this study, including those involving Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, Meiliana, and Gafatar. However, the legal position changed on 2 January 2026 with the entry into force of Law No. 1 of 2023 on the National Criminal Code. Article 4 of Law No. 1/PNPS/1965, from which Article 156a originated, was repealed, while Articles 1–3 of Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 remain in force. The criminal-law framework is now primarily located in Chapter VII of the National Criminal Code, particularly Article 300, as subsequently amended by Law No. 1 of 2026.

This transition is substantively important rather than merely technical. Unlike the former Article 156a, which referred to hostility, abuse, or blasphemy directed against religion itself, the current Article

300 focuses on hostile acts, expressions of hatred or hostility, and incitement to violence or discrimination against persons, groups, or communities on the basis of religion or belief. The amended provision also expressly excludes certain objective, internally limited, or scientific expressions concerning religion or belief when formulated to avoid hostility, hatred, violence, or discrimination. The transition, therefore, changes the central legal question. The issue is no longer limited to whether the former blasphemy provision was normatively ambiguous, but also concerns whether the current framework sufficiently addresses the legal uncertainty and freedom-of-expression problems demonstrated by judicial practice under the former Article 156a regime.

Previous studies on Indonesia's blasphemy law have developed along three major strands. The first examines blasphemy law within the broader context of politics, democracy, and state-religion relations. Hasan (2017), Marshall (2018), Tyson (2021), A'yun (2021), Peterson (2020), and Telle (2018) demonstrate that the enforcement of blasphemy law cannot be separated from political dynamics, religious conservatism, majoritarian pressures, and continuing tensions surrounding the governance of religious diversity. Collectively, these studies portray blasphemy law not merely as a criminal-law instrument but also as a site of political and constitutional contestation concerning the relationship between the state, religion, and democratic rights.

The second strand focuses on the normative construction and reform of Indonesia's blasphemy law. Crouch (2011), Mufidah et al. (2024), Indrayanti and Saraswati (2022), Wardana et al. (2024), Fischer (2021), and Lintang et al. (2021) examine weaknesses in the statutory formulation of blasphemy offenses, their compatibility with the principle of legality and international human rights standards, and possibilities for legal reform through comparative and rights-based approaches. These studies consistently identify legal uncertainty and broad interpretive discretion as central problems in the former regulatory framework and emphasize the need for clearer legal standards to prevent arbitrary or inconsistent restrictions on expression.

The third strand investigates the implementation of blasphemy law and the role of religious authority in shaping the interpretation of contested religious expression. Thresher (2025) highlights the significant role of religious institutions, particularly the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI), in the evidentiary processes of blasphemy trials. More broadly, Noviandy et al. (2023) demonstrate that religious authority in Indonesia can be contested among different religious groups and that the proliferation of religious authorities does not necessarily produce greater acceptance of religious plurality. Their study shows that contests over religious knowledge and mass constituencies may become mechanisms through which authority is asserted and maintained. Similarly, Crouch (2011) and Tyson (2021) demonstrate that judicial decisions and law enforcement practices concerning blasphemy are shaped not only by statutory provisions but also by legal interpretation and the surrounding socio-political context. Taken together, these studies indicate that the regulation of contested religious expression cannot be understood exclusively through statutory rules; it must also be situated within broader interactions among legal institutions, religious authority, and competing claims over legitimate religious interpretation.

Despite these important contributions, two significant gaps remain in the existing literature. First, much of the scholarship on Indonesian blasphemy law examines the former Article 156a regime, its political context, constitutional controversies, or judicial enforcement, while the legal consequences of the transition to the National Criminal Code require further systematic assessment. In particular, it remains necessary to determine whether the reformulation of the offense under Article 300, as amended in 2026, adequately addresses the problems of normative ambiguity and broad interpretive discretion identified under the former regime. Second, previous studies have not sufficiently integrated the historical experience of blasphemy prosecutions with a structured assessment of whether both the former and current regimes satisfy the principles governing permissible limitations on freedom of expression under international human rights law. Consequently, a comparative analysis of the two regulatory regimes is necessary not only to identify changes in statutory formulation but also to evaluate their implications for the protection of constitutional and human rights.

Against this background, this study aims to analyze the development of Indonesia's blasphemy law from the former Article 156a regime to the current framework under the National Criminal Code and to examine its implications for the protection of freedom of expression. More specifically, the study first identifies the normative problems that characterized the former Article 156a and their manifestation in selected judicial cases and subsequently assesses whether the current Article 300 addresses those problems when evaluated through the principles of legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality.

This study argues that the historical problems associated with Indonesia's blasphemy law arose principally from broad statutory formulations and the absence of sufficiently objective parameters to distinguish protected expression from criminal conduct. The transition from the former Article 156a to Article 300 of the National Criminal Code constitutes an important normative development because the new framework changes both the object and formulation of the prohibited conduct and introduces more explicit safeguards for certain forms of expression. However, statutory reform alone does not eliminate the need for clear interpretive standards. Drawing upon the limitation-of-rights framework reflected in the *Siracusa Principles* (1985), this study argues that the current framework should be interpreted and applied consistently with the cumulative requirements of legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality. The comparison between the former and current regimes, therefore, provides a basis for assessing both the progress achieved through criminal-law reform and the legal issues that remain unresolved in reconciling the regulation of religion-related expression with the protection of fundamental rights.

2. Methods

The unit of analysis in this study is the legal regulation and judicial interpretation of blasphemy and religion-related expression in Indonesia across two legal periods. The first concerns the former legal regime centered on Article 156a of the Indonesian Criminal Code, originating from Article 4 of Law No. 1/PNPS/1965, under which the judicial cases examined in this study were prosecuted. The second concerns the current legal framework following the entry into force of Law No. 1 of 2023 on 2 January 2026, particularly Article 300 of the National Criminal Code as amended by Law No. 1 of 2026. This temporal distinction enables the study to evaluate whether contemporary criminal-law reform addresses problems identified in the historical enforcement of Article 156a.

This study employs normative legal research using both the statute and case approaches (P. M. Marzuki, 2011). Primary legal materials include the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia; Law No. 1/PNPS/1965, particularly its provisions that remain relevant after the repeal of Article 4; the former Article 156a of the Indonesian Criminal Code as the legal basis governing the historical cases examined; Law No. 1 of 2023 on the National Criminal Code; Law No. 1 of 2026 on Criminal Adjustment, particularly the amended formulation of Article 300; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); Constitutional Court decisions concerning Indonesia's blasphemy legislation; and judicial decisions involving blasphemy prosecutions. Secondary legal materials consist of books, scholarly journal articles, research reports, and other academic publications relevant to blasphemy law, criminal-law reform, and freedom of expression.

The study relies on secondary data, including primary and secondary legal materials (P. M. Marzuki, 2011). The primary legal materials include the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law No. 1/PNPS/1965, Article 156a of the Indonesian Criminal Code (KUHP), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and judicial decisions concerning blasphemy cases. The secondary legal materials consist of books, scholarly journal articles, research reports, and other academic publications relevant to blasphemy law and freedom of expression.

Data were collected through library research by examining legislation, judicial decisions, scholarly literature, and other documents relevant to blasphemy law and freedom of expression (Zed, 2018). All legal materials were systematically identified, screened for relevance to the research objectives, and organized to support the analytical process.

The legal materials were analyzed qualitatively through statutory interpretation, comparative normative analysis, and analysis of selected judicial decisions. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the study identified the normative structure and interpretive problems of the former Article 156a regime. Second, selected judicial cases were examined to determine how those statutory elements were interpreted and applied in practice. Third, the former regime was compared with Article 300 of the National Criminal Code, as amended by Law No. 1 of 2026, to assess the extent to which the current framework modifies, narrows, or retains the earlier problems. The *Siracusa Principles* (American Association for the International Commission of Jurists, 1985) were then used as an analytical framework to evaluate the implications of both regimes for freedom of expression through the principles of legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality.

3. Results

Normative Transition from Former Article 156a(a) to Article 300 of the National Criminal Code

Indonesia's regulation of blasphemy and religion-related expression can no longer be understood exclusively through Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 and Article 156a of the former Indonesian Criminal Code. Until 1 January 2026, Article 156a served as the principal criminal provision used in blasphemy prosecutions. Originating from Article 4 of Law No. 1/PNPS/1965, the provision criminalized public expressions or acts characterized as hostility, abuse, or blasphemy against a religion practiced in Indonesia, as well as conduct intended to prevent persons from adhering to a religion. However, the provision did not establish precise statutory definitions for key concepts such as hostility, abuse, and blasphemy. Consequently, its constituent elements remained open to extensive interpretation.

A different legal framework has been applied since 2 January 2026. Law No. 1 of 2023 on the National Criminal Code repealed Article 4 of Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 and replaced the former KUHP framework, although Articles 1–3 of Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 remain in force. The regulation of relevant criminal conduct is now set out in Chapter VII of the National Criminal Code, which concerns offenses against religion, belief, and religious- or belief-based life. In particular, Article 300, as amended by Law No. 1 of 2026, criminalizes specified forms of hostility, expressions of hatred or hostility, and incitement to violence or discrimination directed against persons, groups, or communities on the basis of religion or belief.

The current formulation differs from the former Article 156a in several significant respects. First, the statutory orientation shifts from protecting religion as the immediate object of prohibited hostility, abuse, or blasphemy toward protecting persons and groups against religion- or belief-based hostility, hatred, violence, and discrimination. Second, the maximum term of imprisonment under Article 300 is three years, compared with five years under the former Article 156a. Third, Article 300 expressly provides that certain objective, internally limited, or scientific statements concerning religion or belief do not constitute an offense when formulated with appropriate efforts to avoid hostile, hateful, violent, or discriminatory expression. These changes indicate an attempt to establish more specific boundaries for criminal liability while providing greater recognition of legitimate forms of expression.

Nevertheless, the transition does not eliminate every interpretive issue. Terms such as hostility and hatred, as well as the conditions under which expression falls within the statutory exemption, continue to require legal interpretation. Accordingly, the normative issue examined in this study is no longer simply whether Indonesian law contains an undefined concept of “blasphemy.” Rather, it concerns whether the current framework sufficiently remedies the uncertainty demonstrated under the former Article 156a regime and whether its remaining open-textured elements can be interpreted consistently with freedom-of-expression guarantees.

Table 1. Normative Transition from Former Article 156a to the Current Article 300

Normative Aspect	Former Article 156a KUHP	Current Article 300 of the National Criminal Code	Analytical Implication
Legal status	Applied to historical blasphemy prosecutions before the National Criminal Code entered into force	Applicable since 2 January 2026 under Law No. 1 of 2023 as amended by Law No. 1 of 2026	Historical cases must be distinguished from the current legal regime
Object of protection	Religion practiced in Indonesia and religious adherence	Persons, groups, or communities targeted on the basis of religion or belief	Indicates a shift from the protection of religion as an abstract object toward the protection against religion-based hostility and discrimination
Prohibited conduct	Hostility, abuse, or blasphemy against religion and specified anti-religious conduct	Hostile acts, expressions of hatred or hostility, and incitement to violence or discrimination	The current formulation specifies the prohibited conduct differently
Express protection for objective/scientific expression	No comparable explicit statutory safeguard	Certain objective, internally limited, or scientific expressions are expressly excluded, subject to statutory conditions	Provides a clearer safeguard for legitimate expression, although interpretation remains necessary
Maximum imprisonment	Five years	Three years or a category IV fine	The current provision adopts a different penal structure
Principal interpretive issue	Undefined concepts of hostility, abuse, and blasphemy	Meaning and threshold of hostility, hatred, incitement, and application of the statutory exception	Legal uncertainty is reduced in some respects but not necessarily eliminated

Source: Compiled from Law No. 1/PNPS/1965, the former Article 156a of the Indonesian Criminal Code, Law No. 1 of 2023, and Law No. 1 of 2026.

As summarized in Table 1, the transition from former Article 156a(a) to the current Article 300 represents a substantive reformulation of religion-related criminal liability. Under the former regime, the statutory expressions “hostility,” “abuse,” and “blasphemy against a religion” were not accompanied by sufficiently precise criteria for determining the threshold of punishable conduct. This problem was compounded by the broader framework of Law No. 1/PNPS/1965, particularly the reference in Article 1 to interpretations or activities regarded as deviating from the fundamental teachings of a religion. The absence of clear statutory parameters left substantial room for law enforcement officials, religious experts, and judges to determine the meaning and scope of these elements in individual cases.

The constitutional controversy surrounding this framework was reflected in a series of judicial review proceedings before the Constitutional Court, including Decisions Nos. 140/PUU-VII/2009, 84/PUU-X/2012, 56/PUU-XV/2017, 76/PUU-XVI/2018, and 5/PUU-XVII/2019. The Court rejected the petitions in Decisions No. 140/PUU-VII/2009, No. 84/PUU-X/2012, No. 56/PUU-XV/2017, and No.

76/PUU-XVI/2018, thereby maintaining the constitutionality of the challenged framework, whereas the petition in Decision No. 5/PUU-XVII/2019 was declared inadmissible. At the same time, the Court had previously recognized that aspects of the statutory formulation could be improved through the legislative process. The subsequent enactment and entry into force of the National Criminal Code therefore altered the normative context within which these earlier constitutional controversies must now be understood.

The comparison indicates that the current Article 300 addresses several features of the former Article 156a(a) by changing the statutory target of the prohibited conduct to include hostility, hatred, violence, and discrimination, and by introducing an express exclusion for certain objective, internally limited, or scientific expressions. These changes provide more specific statutory boundaries than those available under the former regime. Nevertheless, the current provision continues to employ open-textured concepts, particularly “hostility” and “hatred,” whose practical meaning will depend on future interpretation. The central finding is therefore not that the normative uncertainty identified under former Article 156a(a) remains unchanged, but that the 2026 framework represents a partial normative response whose practical capacity to produce greater legal certainty remains to be tested through subsequent judicial application.

Patterns of Blasphemy Law Enforcement in Indonesian Judicial Practice

The judicial cases analyzed in this subsection belong to the former Article 156a(a) legal regime and should therefore be understood as historical evidence of how Indonesia's blasphemy law operated before the National Criminal Code entered into force on 2 January 2026. They do not constitute evidence of judicial enforcement under the current Article 300, for which a comparable body of final judicial decisions has not yet developed. Their analytical relevance lies instead in identifying the interpretive problems that accompanied the former statutory formulation and providing a baseline against which the normative changes introduced by the current framework may be evaluated.

The enforcement of Indonesia's blasphemy law under the former Article 156a(a) regime revealed a consistent pattern in which the determination of criminal liability depended not only on proving the defendant's conduct but also on interpreting the religious teachings at issue. Unlike conventional criminal offenses, whose constituent elements could generally be assessed through relatively clear legal standards, blasphemy cases required courts to determine whether a particular statement, action, or religious interpretation constituted hostility, religious abuse, or blasphemy. Because the provision did not provide sufficiently precise legal definitions of these statutory elements, law enforcement authorities and judges relied heavily on legal interpretation when adjudicating such cases (Anggraeny, 2017; Rummelink, 2003).

This pattern was also reflected in the evidentiary process of blasphemy trials. Unlike ordinary criminal cases, which primarily relied on factual evidence to establish the elements of an offense, blasphemy prosecutions commonly involved testimony from religious experts to determine whether a statement, action, or religious teaching deviated from the fundamental doctrines of a recognized religion or constituted blasphemy (Ja'far, 2017). Such expert testimony served not only to explain the relevant religious context but also to provide an important basis for judicial interpretation of the statutory elements of hostility, religious abuse, and blasphemy (Kherid & Wisnaeni, 2019). Consequently, adjudication under the former regime demonstrated a close interaction between legal reasoning and religious interpretation, making the boundary between legal assessment and doctrinal evaluation increasingly indistinct (Mufidah et al., 2024; Thresher, 2025).

This interpretative pattern was evident in several high-profile blasphemy cases. The cases of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (*Ahok*), Meiliana, and *Gafatar* involved substantially different factual circumstances, ranging from public statements concerning Qur'anic verses and expressions related to religious practices to the dissemination of religious teachings. Nevertheless, prosecutors charged the defendants under Article 156a(a) on the ground that their conduct satisfied the statutory elements of the offense. These variations demonstrated that the former provision was applied across highly diverse factual contexts, while the determination of whether the constituent elements of the offense had been

satisfied depended substantially on case-by-case interpretation (Fischer, 2021; Marshall, 2018; Peterson, 2020). To clarify these differences, Table 2 summarizes the principal characteristics of the three cases by comparing the subject of the dispute, the primary basis of judicial consideration, and the pattern of interpretation applied in each case. This comparison makes visible how substantially different forms of religion-related expression were brought within the same statutory framework under former Article 156a(a). It also illustrates the extent to which judicial assessment depended on religious interpretation, expert testimony, public perception, and contextual considerations rather than on a uniform statutory threshold.

Table 2. Patterns of Blasphemy Law Enforcement in Indonesian Judicial Practice

Case	Subject of the Dispute	Primary Basis of Judicial Consideration	Pattern of Interpretation
Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (<i>Ahok</i>)	Public statement concerning Qur'an Surah Al-Mā'idah verse 51	Religious interpretation and perceived social impact	The statement was interpreted as constituting an insult to religion
Meiliana	Complaint regarding the volume of the <i>adhan</i>	Public perception and expert testimony	The expression was interpreted as constituting blasphemy
<i>Gafatar</i>	Religious teachings	Assessment of deviation from the doctrines of a recognized religion	Doctrinal deviation was interpreted as satisfying the elements of the offense

Source: Compiled from judicial decisions and Constitutional Court decisions.

As summarized in Table 2, although the three cases involved substantially different factual circumstances, the courts applied former Article 156a(a) as the principal basis for criminal liability while relying considerably on interpretations of religious teachings and the broader social context surrounding each case. This pattern was particularly evident in the prosecution of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (*Ahok*), where the public prosecutor referred to the religious opinion (*pendapat dan sikap keagamaan*) issued by the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (MUI) on October 11, 2016, concerning his reference to Qur'an Surah Al-Mā'idah verse 51 (Purnamasari, 2016). The significance of the MUI's intervention extended beyond the provision of doctrinal interpretation. Zuhri et al. (2024) show that MUI fatwas and religious opinions can function as forms of religious authority whose influence extends into wider social and political arenas; in the *Ahok* controversy, the religious dispute surrounding Al-Mā'idah 51 was subsequently linked to the mobilization of the 411 and 212 movements. Their analysis illustrates how religious authority may acquire broader legitimating and mobilizing effects once religious interpretation enters contested public and political spaces. In the *Ahok* case, therefore, the determination of criminal liability cannot be understood solely as an exercise in statutory interpretation; it also illustrates the interaction between criminal law, institutional religious authority, and the social reception of religious interpretation. Similar patterns appeared in the Meiliana and *Gafatar* cases, although the forms and institutional configurations of religious interpretation differed between them.

These cases demonstrate that enforcement under the former Article 156a regime lacked sufficiently consistent legal standards for distinguishing protected criticism, religious interpretation, freedom of expression, and criminal blasphemy. Differences in the factual characteristics of individual cases were not accompanied by explicit statutory criteria capable of consistently determining the threshold of criminal liability. Consequently, these historical cases illustrate the interpretive problems against which the current National Criminal Code must be assessed. They do not establish how Article 300 will necessarily be interpreted in future cases, but they provide an important benchmark for examining whether the reformed statutory formulation can prevent the uncertainty and interpretive dependence associated with the former regime.

The Intersection Between Blasphemy Law and Freedom of Expression

Indonesian law protects both religious life and freedom of expression, although the legal framework governing their interaction changed substantially in 2026. Freedom of expression is constitutionally protected under Articles 28E(3) and 28F of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia and reinforced by Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights and Article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR). Historically, restrictions on blasphemy were imposed under Article 156a(a) of the former Indonesian Criminal Code. Since 2 January 2026, however, relevant criminal restrictions have been governed primarily by the National Criminal Code, including Article 300 as amended by Law No. 1 of 2026, alongside the remaining provisions of Law No. 1/PNPS/1965. Accordingly, the relationship between freedom of expression and religion-related criminal law must now be examined through both the historical experience of Article 156a(a) and the revised normative structure of the current legal framework (Commission, 2010; S. Marzuki, 2013).

Under the former Article 156a(a) regime, the intersection between blasphemy law and freedom of expression became particularly visible when statements or public expressions that could fall within the sphere of protected speech were prosecuted as alleged acts of blasphemy. The disputed conduct did not always involve direct insults against a religion. Instead, it included statements concerning religious texts, expressions relating to religious practices, and the dissemination of religious teachings. This pattern was evident in the cases of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (*Ahok*), Meiliana, and *Gafatar*, where substantially different forms of expression resulted in prosecution under the same criminal provision after authorities considered them to satisfy the statutory elements of the offense. These cases demonstrated that, under the former regime, the boundary between constitutionally protected expression and criminally punishable blasphemy was determined substantially through case-specific interpretation rather than through clearly articulated statutory thresholds (BBC News Indonesia, 2017, 2019; Purnamasari, 2016).

Table 3. Freedom of Expression and Religion-Related Criminal Regulation Before and After the 2026 Legal Transition

Aspect	Former Legal Regime	Current Legal Framework	Human Rights Question
Primary criminal provision	Article 156a(a) of the former KUHP	Article 300 of the National Criminal Code as amended by Law No. 1 of 2026	Whether the restriction is sufficiently clear and foreseeable
Protected interest	Religion as the object of hostility, abuse, or blasphemy	Persons, groups, or communities targeted on the basis of religion or belief	Whether the restriction is directed toward protecting identifiable rights-holders and legitimate public interests
Restricted expression	Hostility, abuse, or blasphemy against religion	Hostility, expressions of hatred or hostility, and incitement to violence or discrimination	Whether the criminal threshold is sufficiently precise
Express safeguards	No equivalent explicit statutory exclusion for objective or scientific expression	Certain objective, internally limited, or scientific expressions are expressly excluded, subject to statutory conditions	Whether legitimate religious debate, criticism, interpretation, and scholarship are adequately protected
Freedom-of-expression framework	Articles 28E and 28F of the 1945 Constitution, Law No. 39 of 1999, and Article 19 ICCPR	The same constitutional and international guarantees continue to apply	Whether restrictions satisfy legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality

Source: Compiled from the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law No. 39 of 1999, Law No. 1/PNPS/1965, former Article 156a(a) of the Indonesian Criminal Code, Law No. 1 of 2023, Law No. 1 of 2026, and the ICCPR.

As summarized in Table 3, the historical relationship between blasphemy regulation and freedom of expression was characterized by substantial overlap between constitutionally protected expression and conduct that could be prosecuted under former Article 156a(a). The cases examined in this study demonstrate that expressions concerning religious texts, practices, and teachings could acquire criminal significance through judicial interpretation, even though the former provision did not establish sufficiently precise criteria to distinguish protected expression from punishable blasphemy. Under that regime, the boundary between these categories was therefore determined substantially through case-specific interpretation rather than through clearly articulated statutory thresholds.

The current Article 300 modifies this relationship in several important respects. Instead of employing the former formulation of hostility, abuse, or blasphemy directed against religion, the current provision identifies hostility, hatred, and incitement to violence or discrimination directed against persons, groups, or communities on the basis of religion or belief. It also expressly excludes certain objective, internally limited, or scientific expressions from criminal liability when the statutory conditions are satisfied. The comparison therefore indicates that the current framework provides a more differentiated statutory structure for identifying potentially punishable expression than the former Article 156a(a) regime.

Nevertheless, the normative transition does not by itself establish how consistently the current provision will distinguish protected expression from criminal conduct in judicial practice. Concepts such as hostility and hatred, as well as the scope and application of the statutory exclusion, continue to require legal interpretation. Because a comparable body of final judicial decisions under the current Article 300 has not yet developed, the practical effectiveness of these safeguards cannot yet be established from judicial practice. The finding at this stage is therefore one of normative change accompanied by continuing interpretive uncertainty: the current framework introduces more specific statutory boundaries than the former regime, but the extent to which those boundaries will strengthen legal certainty and protect freedom of expression remains dependent on their future interpretation and application.

4. Discussion

This study demonstrates that the legal problem surrounding blasphemy and religion-related expression in Indonesia should be understood as a process of normative transition rather than as a static deficiency in a single criminal provision. The historical cases examined in this study show that former Article 156a(a) operated through broad statutory concepts of hostility, abuse, and blasphemy that lacked sufficiently precise legal parameters. This formulation created substantial room for case-specific interpretation by prosecutors, religious experts, and courts. The current legal framework, however, differs materially from that historical regime. Article 300 of the National Criminal Code, as amended by Law No. 1 of 2026, redirects criminal liability toward hostility, hatred, and incitement to violence or discrimination against persons, groups, or communities on the basis of religion or belief and expressly excludes certain objective, internally limited, or scientific expressions from criminal liability. The central issue is therefore no longer simply whether Indonesian blasphemy law contains vague statutory concepts, but whether the current framework sufficiently remedies the legal uncertainty demonstrated under the former regime while remaining compatible with the requirements governing restrictions on freedom of expression.

These findings both confirm and extend earlier scholarship on the weaknesses of Indonesia's blasphemy law. Indrayanti and Saraswati (2022), Wardana et al. (2024), and Fischer (2021) similarly argue that the statutory formulation of blasphemy remains vague, thereby creating broad interpretive discretion and potentially conflicting with the principle of legality. However, these studies mainly criticize the substance of the legislation and advocate legal reform (Arsil, Aziezi, Syarifah, & Abidin, 2018). The present study demonstrates a more fundamental problem: the absence of normative

definitions directly shapes the pattern of law enforcement itself. However, the present findings also demonstrate that the legal context has changed significantly. The transition to Article 300 introduces a different statutory structure and more explicit boundaries for certain forms of protected expression. Accordingly, earlier critiques of Article 156a(a) remain important for explaining the historical problem, but they cannot automatically be treated as descriptions of the current legal framework.

This interpretation aligns with previous scholarship that situates Indonesia's blasphemy law within a broader system of governing religious diversity, maintaining social stability, and negotiating competing claims of religious authority. Marshall (2018) places blasphemy regulation within the wider governance of religious freedom and pluralism, while Hasan (2017) and Peterson (2020) show how concerns over religious conflict, conservatism, and public order have shaped the persistence of restrictive measures concerning religion. Tyson (2021) further demonstrates that political dynamics and concerns about judicial legitimacy influence the practical enforcement of blasphemy law. More recently, Yusuf et al. (2026) conceptualize the governance of religious deviance in Indonesia in terms of "strategic ambiguity," showing how selective law enforcement, reactive state intervention, reliance on religious authority, and asymmetrical rights protection can generate legal uncertainty while simultaneously serving concerns over social stability. The influence of religious authority may also extend beyond doctrinal interpretation into broader forms of collective mobilization. Muhsin et al. (2020), through their analysis of the *Islamic Defending Action* and the Fatwa Defenders Movement, demonstrate how religious opinions associated with the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* became connected with organizational networks, mass mobilization, and the production of wider social and political legitimacy. These studies help situate the present findings within a broader socio-religious context: the historical operation of former Article 156a(a) occurred not only within a field of legal interpretation but also within interactions among state institutions, religious authority, public mobilization, and public-order concerns. The transition to Article 300 should therefore be understood not merely as a technical reformulation of criminal provisions, but as an attempt to establish clearer normative boundaries within a regulatory field historically shaped by tensions among state governance, religious authority, social stability, collective responses to contested religious expression, and individual rights.

These findings also correspond with the Legitimate Aim Principle articulated in the *Siracusa Principles* (American Association for the International Commission of Jurists, 1985), which recognizes that restrictions on human rights may be justified when they pursue legitimate objectives, including the protection of public order and the rights and freedoms of others. Within the Indonesian context, however, the application of international human rights standards occurs in a socio-religious and constitutional environment shaped by interactions among universal rights principles, religious values, local cultural traditions, and national legal institutions. Harlina et al. (2026) describe this interaction as a form of contextual universalism, in which universal human rights norms are interpreted through Indonesia's particular social, religious, and constitutional context rather than applied in complete abstraction from it. This perspective helps explain why the regulation of religion-related expression in Indonesia is often framed in terms of concerns about religious harmony, public order, and social cohesion. Nevertheless, contextual considerations cannot by themselves justify restrictions on freedom of expression. The existence of a legitimate objective remains only one of several cumulative requirements governing permissible limitations. Accordingly, restrictions imposed under the current legal framework must still satisfy the requirements of legality, necessity, and proportionality. The relevant question is therefore not whether international human rights standards should be displaced by Indonesia's socio-religious context, but how that context can be accommodated without undermining the substantive safeguards that international human rights law establishes for freedom of expression.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that the enforcement of Indonesia's blasphemy law continues to rely primarily on case-by-case interpretation (Badry, 2019). As judicial practice shows, public statements, religious interpretations, and expressions made in public forums may become criminal offenses when authorities conclude they satisfy the statutory elements of blasphemy under Article 156a of the Indonesian Criminal Code. However, Indonesian law has yet to establish objective

legal parameters that consistently distinguish constitutionally protected expression from expression that exceeds permissible limits and therefore gives rise to criminal liability. Consequently, legal authorities determine the limits of constitutional protection largely through interpretive processes rather than objective legal standards.

These findings extend earlier critiques advanced by Indrayanti and Saraswati (Indrayanti & Saraswati, 2022), Wardana et al. (Wardana et al., 2024), and Fischer (Fischer, 2021), who argue that the vague formulation of Indonesia's blasphemy offense creates opportunities to criminalize expression that should receive human rights protection. The present study demonstrates that the problem extends beyond normative ambiguity. Indonesian law also lacks objective standards to determine when criminalization is genuinely necessary and whether imprisonment is a proportionate response to a particular form of expression. Accordingly, broad interpretive discretion affects not only legal certainty but also judicial assessments concerning the necessity and proportionality of restrictions on freedom of expression.

This interpretation corresponds with the Necessity and Proportionality Principles contained in the *Siracusa Principles* (American Association for the International Commission of Jurists, 1985), which require governments to impose restrictions on human rights only when such measures are genuinely necessary to achieve legitimate objectives and when authorities adopt the least restrictive and most proportionate means available. Within the context of Indonesia's blasphemy law, the existence of criminal sanctions does not automatically demonstrate that criminal prosecution represents the only available mechanism for protecting religion or maintaining public order. Instead, imposing imprisonment for various forms of expression requires objective standards that demonstrate both the seriousness of the threatened harm and why less restrictive legal measures would prove inadequate. Accordingly, this study argues that the principal weakness in applying Article 156a extends beyond the clarity of the statutory language itself. It also arises from the absence of objective standards governing the necessity and proportionality of restricting freedom of expression. This contribution broadens the scholarly debate by shifting the discussion beyond legality alone to evaluating the permissible limits on restricting fundamental human rights.

The preceding discussion of legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality demonstrates that Indonesia's blasphemy law cannot be adequately understood solely through the perspective of criminal law or human rights law in isolation. Normative ambiguity, interpretive judicial practice, and the intersection between blasphemy law and freedom of expression constitute interconnected dimensions of the same legal problem. Accordingly, Indonesia's blasphemy law should function not only as an instrument for protecting religion but also as a mechanism for restricting constitutional rights, while simultaneously satisfying the cumulative requirements of legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality.

This study consequently makes three related contributions. First, it reframes Indonesia's blasphemy-law debate as a legal transition from the historical enforcement of Article 156a(a) to the contemporary framework established by Article 300, thereby avoiding the assumption that problems identified under the former regime automatically describe the law currently in force. Second, it demonstrates that assessing legal reform requires attention not only to changes in statutory wording but also to whether the new formulation establishes clearer thresholds for distinguishing protected expression from conduct that may legitimately attract criminal liability. Third, it integrates the legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality requirements with the historical experience of Indonesian blasphemy prosecutions, providing a framework through which the future interpretation and enforcement of Article 300 may be evaluated.

The practical implication is therefore no longer limited to legislative reform. The more immediate challenge concerns the interpretation and implementation of the current Article 300. Courts and law enforcement authorities should articulate clear criteria for determining the meaning and threshold of hostility, hatred, violence, and discrimination; distinguish criticism, theological disagreement, academic analysis, and other protected expression from punishable conduct; and explicitly assess the necessity and proportionality of criminal intervention. The statutory exclusion for objective, internally

limited, and scientific expression should likewise be interpreted in a manner that provides meaningful protection for legitimate religious discussion rather than as a narrowly formal exception. Future legislative review may still be necessary if judicial practice demonstrates continuing uncertainty or excessive restriction, but the immediate test of the 2026 reform will be whether its interpretation avoids reproducing the case-specific uncertainty associated with former Article 156a(a).

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the principal problem of Indonesia's blasphemy law does not lie in the criminalization of blasphemy itself but rather in the absence of clear juridical definitions and objective legal parameters governing the statutory elements of the offense. This normative ambiguity has produced a pattern of law enforcement that depends heavily on the interpretations of law enforcement authorities and judges, making it difficult to objectively distinguish between expression protected as a constitutional right and expression that may be prosecuted as criminal blasphemy. Accordingly, the issue of blasphemy law should not be understood merely as a conflict between the protection of religion and freedom of expression. Instead, it should be understood as a constitutional question concerning how the state may legitimately define the limits of restrictions on rights within a pluralistic democratic society.

The principal contribution of this study lies in its application of the *Siracusa Principles* as an interpretive framework for analyzing Indonesia's blasphemy law. Unlike previous studies, which primarily focused on criticizing either the substance of the legislation or its enforcement practices, this study demonstrates that any evaluation of blasphemy law should be conducted through the four cumulative standards governing restrictions on human rights: legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality. This framework shows that the protection of religion and freedom of expression should not be treated as competing legal regimes but rather as complementary constitutional interests that require careful balancing through restrictions consistent with international human rights standards. These findings provide a conceptual foundation for reformulating Indonesia's blasphemy law and support the development of more consistent judicial interpretation, thereby strengthening legal certainty and protecting citizens' constitutional rights.

This study has several limitations. It adopts a normative legal approach that focuses primarily on legislation, judicial decisions, and legal doctrine without empirically examining law enforcement practices or the perspectives of the actors involved in blasphemy cases. Future research should therefore adopt socio-legal or empirical approaches to investigate how law enforcement officials, judges, religious leaders, and members of the public construct the boundaries between freedom of expression and blasphemy in practice. Such research would deepen understanding of the implementation of principles of human rights limitation while providing stronger empirical foundations for developing legal policies that are more responsive to the dynamics of Indonesia's pluralistic society.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Statement: The authors used Grammarly solely for language editing, including grammar, clarity, and stylistic improvements.

Author Contribution Statement: Desia Rakhma Banjarani: Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft, and Formal Analysis; Rudi Natamiharja: Methodology, Formal Analysis, and Writing – Review & Editing; Heni Siswanto: Validation and Writing – Review & Editing; Meria Utama: Validation and Writing – Review & Editing. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding Statement: This research received no specific grant or financial support from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that they have no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, analysis, or publication of this article.

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