

# Advantages and disadvantages of player naturalization law: Implications for football development and nationalism

Amelia<sup>1\*</sup>, DM Zahroh<sup>1</sup> and I Zaki<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Law, Muhammadiyah University of Cirebon, Cirebon, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author email: [amelia@gmail.com](mailto:amelia@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The naturalization program for football players has been a recurring issue in debates on the development of the Indonesian national team since the early 2010s. In recent years, the phenomenon has become increasingly common as part of broader efforts to enhance national team performance. Based on Law Number 12 of 2006 on Citizenship, foreigners who have provided services to Indonesia or whose presence is deemed to serve the national interest may be granted Indonesian citizenship. This study examines the implications of naturalization through a comprehensive analysis of its legal framework and its impact on multiple aspects, including the quality and competitiveness of the national team, the regeneration and opportunities for local players, and the cultivation of national identity and values. While naturalization offers potential benefits in raising the international profile and achievements of Indonesian football, it also poses challenges to domestic player development and may influence perceptions of national identity. Therefore, the practice of naturalization must be carefully balanced with policies that strengthen grassroots football, nurture local talent, and uphold the values of nationalism in sports.

## Keywords

Naturalization law, Football development, Citizenship policy, National identity

## Introduction

Football is one of the most popular sports in Indonesia, and in recent years, the naturalization program for football players has become a topic of debate in relation to the development of the Indonesian national team. In 2010, Indonesia naturalized players such as Cristian Gonzales and Irfan Bachdim to strengthen the national squad in preparation for the AFF Championship. Currently, Indonesia is ranked 28th in the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and 5th in Southeast Asia, and the national team has participated in various international tournaments, including the FIFA World Cup qualifiers and the AFC Asian Cup [1].

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The phenomenon of player naturalization has become increasingly common. According to Law No. 12 of 2006 on Indonesian Citizenship, foreigners who have rendered services to Indonesia or whose presence is deemed necessary for the national interest may be granted citizenship. Citizenship is conferred directly by the President after a review by the House of Representatives, except in cases involving dual citizenship. This provision has made it possible for foreign athletes to obtain Indonesian nationality through an expedited process [7].

Nevertheless, the naturalization program has been met with mixed responses. The Minister of Youth and Sports, Zainudin Amali, argued that naturalization alone is not an effective strategy for building a strong national team, as many naturalized players lack the spirit of patriotism and nationalism compared to players who are born, raised, and live in Indonesia. These concerns highlight a key tension in the policy: while naturalization may provide short-term solutions to strengthen the team, it also raises questions about national identity, player regeneration, and the long-term development of Indonesian football.

Based on these issues, this article seeks to analyze the legal and socio-political implications of naturalizing foreign football players in Indonesia, focusing on its impact on the development of football as well as its relationship with the values of nationalism.

## Method

This study employs a normative legal research method, focusing on the examination of legal documents and relevant literature through qualitative analysis. As a legal study, the research primarily relies on secondary data obtained from various sources, including academic journals, books, statutory regulations, and previous studies [8]. The collected data are then analyzed comprehensively to assess the implications of player naturalization from multiple perspectives, particularly its influence on the quality and competitiveness of the national team, the regeneration of local football talent, and the preservation of national identity and values.

## Results and Discussion

### *Legal process naturalization in Indonesia*

The legal framework governing citizenship in Indonesia has undergone significant changes, evolving from Law No. 62 of 1958 to the more comprehensive Law No. 12 of 2006 on Citizenship of the Republic of Indonesia. Article 26 paragraph (1) of the 1945 Constitution stipulates that Indonesian citizens are native Indonesians and persons of other nationalities who are legalized by law as citizens. Naturalization represents one of the legal pathways for foreigners to acquire Indonesian citizenship, provided that they meet specific legal requirements [9].

Law No. 12 of 2006 details the procedures and conditions for naturalization. It distinguishes three main categories of applications: the general procedure under Article

8, naturalization based on mixed marriages under Article 19, and naturalization for services to the state under Article 20 [10]. Articles 8 and 19 outline general requirements, including that applicants must be at least 18 years old or married, have resided in Indonesia for a minimum of five consecutive years or ten non-consecutive years, be physically and mentally healthy, able to speak Indonesian and acknowledge Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, have no criminal record with imprisonment of one year or more, renounce dual citizenship, possess stable employment and income, and pay citizenship fees to the State Treasury.

Meanwhile, Article 20 provides special provisions for applicants who render services to Indonesia or whose presence is considered in the national interest. This pathway is often utilized in the naturalization of foreign athletes, particularly football players, who are granted citizenship to represent Indonesia in international competitions. Unlike general procedures, Article 20 does not require the standard residency period, reflecting the state's flexibility in prioritizing national interests [11].

The law embodies several key principles: the *ius sanguinis* principle (citizenship by descent), the *ius soli* principle (limited citizenship by birthplace), and the principle of single citizenship, with limited dual citizenship permitted only for children. Compared to Law No. 62 of 1958, which rejected the concept of dual citizenship entirely, Law No. 12 of 2006 offers greater clarity, particularly concerning the citizenship status of children born from mixed marriages between Indonesian citizens and foreigners [12].

This framework highlights that naturalization is not merely a bureaucratic process but a legal mechanism balancing individual aspirations, state interests, and the broader goals of national identity. In the context of football, Article 20 serves as the primary legal basis for fast-tracking the naturalization of foreign players, underscoring the role of law in shaping both sports policy and national representation.

Currently, no foreign football player has obtained Indonesian citizenship through the general naturalization procedure. Instead, only one player has acquired citizenship through the marriage mechanism as stipulated in Article 19, as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Naturalized Football Players Based on Article 19 of the Citizenship Law.

| Name               | Age of Naturalization | National Team Contribution |
|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Christian Gonzales | 34 Years              | 28 Caps 12 Goals           |

Christian Gonzales is the only football player who obtained Indonesian citizenship through the marriage mechanism as stipulated in Article 19 of the Citizenship Law. Although he only became a citizen at the age of 34, Gonzales contributed positively to the Indonesian national team, scoring 12 goals in 28 appearances.

According to Article 6 of the Citizenship Law, citizenship obtained by descent is not formally categorized as naturalization. However, this provision does not apply to players who previously held dual citizenship. A list of football players who obtained Indonesian citizenship based on Article 6 is presented in Table 2. While this mechanism has helped

strengthen national teams across various age levels, scholars often consider the status of such players as part of the broader naturalization process.

**Table 2.** Naturalized Football Players Based on Article 6 of the Citizenship Law.

| <b>Name</b>        | <b>Age at Naturalization</b> | <b>National Team Contribution</b> |
|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Irfan Bachdim      | 18 years                     | 39 Caps 12 Goals                  |
| Eikan Baigot       | 17 years                     | U-21 National Team                |
| Jack Brown         | 18 years                     | U-21 National Team                |
| Jordi Amat         | 30 years                     | Senior National Team              |
| Justin Hubner      | 20 years                     | Senior National Team              |
| Jay Idzes          | 23 years                     | Senior National Team              |
| Shayne Pattynama   | 25 years                     | Senior National Team              |
| Sandy Walsh        | 28 Years                     | Senior National Team              |
| Nathan Tjoe-A-On   | 22 years                     | Senior National Team              |
| Tom Haye           | 28 Years                     | Senior National Team              |
| Ivar Jenner        | 19 years old                 | Senior National Team              |
| Ragnar Oratmangoen | 26 Years                     | Senior National Team              |
| Rafael Struick     | 20 years                     | Senior National Team              |

**Table 3.** Naturalized Football Players Based on Article 20 of the Citizenship Law

| <b>No</b> | <b>Name</b>        | <b>Age at Naturalization</b> | <b>National Team Contribution</b> |
|-----------|--------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1         | Jhon van Beukering | 29 years old                 | 1 Caps 0 Goals                    |
| 2         | Llija Spasojevic   | 30 years old                 | 5 Caps 4 Goals                    |
| 3         | Toni Cusel         | 31 years old                 | 2 Caps 0 Goals                    |
| 4         | Sergio Van Dijk    | 31 years old                 | 6 Caps 1 Goal                     |
| 5         | Kim Kurniawan      | 18 years old                 | 1 Caps 0 Goals                    |
| 6         | Stefano Lilipaly   | 21 years old                 | 29 caps 3 goals                   |
| 7         | Raphael Maitimo    | 28 years old                 | 21 Caps 4 Goals                   |
| 8         | Diego Michels      | 19 years old                 | 2 Caps 0 Goals                    |
| 9         | Ezra Walian        | 20 years old                 | 1 Caps 1 Gol                      |
| 10        | Esaian Benson      | 35 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 11        | Fasawa Camara      | 35 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 12        | Sackie Doe         | 31 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 13        | Bruno Casimir      | 37 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 14        | Mamadou Diallo     | 33 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 15        | Herman Zumafo      | 37 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 16        | Zubairou Garba     | 32 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 17        | Mamadou El Hadji   | 32 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 18        | Victor Egbonefo    | 26 years old                 | 10 Caps 0 Goals                   |
| 19        | Okay John          | 35 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 20        | Greg Nwokolo       | 25 years old                 | 7 Caps 2 Goals                    |
| 21        | Guy Junior         | 30 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 22        | Paulin Bio         | 32 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 23        | Osas Saha          | 32 years old                 | 2 Caps 0 Goals                    |
| 24        | Godstime Oseluka   | 30 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 25        | Mufilutau Ogunsula | 29 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 26        | Fabiano Beltrame   | 36 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 27        | Otavio Dutra       | 35 years old                 | 2 Caps 0 Goals                    |
| 28        | Silvio Escobar     | 33 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |
| 29        | Alberto Goncalves  | 38 years old                 | 12 Caps 10 Goals                  |
| 30        | Esteban Vizcara    | 33 years old                 | 1 Caps 0 Goals                    |
| 31        | Marc Klok          | 27 years old                 | 0 Caps                            |

In addition to the three pathways previously discussed, Article 20 of the Citizenship Law provides another mechanism, allowing foreigners who have rendered services to the

Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) to acquire citizenship on the grounds of national interest. Through this provision, researchers identified a total of 31 football players who were granted Indonesian citizenship under Article 20 to represent the country in international competitions.

From [Table 3](#), it can be observed that the naturalization of football players under Article 20 of the Citizenship Law is primarily justified on the basis of services rendered to the state or considerations of national interest. However, only a small proportion of these players have made a significant impact on the Indonesian national team. Notable examples include Stefano Lilipaly (29 caps, 3 goals), Raphael Maitimo (21 caps, 4 goals), and Alberto Goncalves (12 caps, 10 goals). A recurring problem is that many of these players were already past their peak playing years when the naturalization process took place. Out of 31 players naturalized under Article 20, 21 were above the age of 30, whereas the generally recognized productive age range for football players is between 19 and 30 years.

Article 20 stipulates that citizenship may be granted to foreigners who have either contributed to the country or are deemed to serve the national interest. Yet, this creates a paradox, as many of the naturalized players had never represented Indonesia in competitive matches, raising questions about the long-term effectiveness and strategic value of naturalization for national football development [\[13\]](#).

### *The advantages, disadvantages, and nationalism dimensions of athlete naturalization*

The practice of naturalizing football players in Indonesia is not a recent phenomenon. The PSSI first introduced naturalization in the 1950s, when several Dutch players—such as Van der Berg, Pietersen, Pesch, Boelannrd van Tuyl, and Arnold van der Vin—were granted Indonesian citizenship. However, only Arnold van der Vin, a goalkeeper, managed to make an appearance for the national team, debuting on July 27, 1952, in a friendly match against Hong Kong. After a period of decline, naturalized footballers regained popularity in the 2000s. Under the leadership of the controversial PSSI Chairman Nurdin Halid, the association naturalized several players, including Kim Jeffrey Kurniawan, Diego Michiels, Tonnie Cusell, Stefano Lilipaly, John van Beukering, Ruben Warbanaran, and Raphael Maitimo. Cristian Gonzales, by contrast, took a different route by applying independently for Indonesian citizenship. Yet, despite the influx of foreign-born players, Indonesia failed to secure championship titles, and disappointment surfaced, such as in the 2016 AFF Cup when coach Alfred Riedl expressed frustration with naturalized players who did not meet expectations [\[14\]](#).

In the Shin Tae-yong (STY) era, naturalization has continued, though with a more selective focus on athletes of Indonesian descent who are willing to commit to representing the national team. Supporters of this approach argue that naturalization does not necessarily undermine the development of local players, as it is targeted at addressing immediate gaps in quality and competitiveness. Nevertheless, critics warn



that excessive reliance on foreign players risks sidelining grassroots programs and youth development initiatives. Football security officer Binder Singh urged stakeholders not to be overly concerned, noting that under STY, the Indonesian national team has shown promising results. Similarly, Adhika Wicaksana, former PSSI commercial officer, cautioned that prioritizing foreign talent should not come at the expense of investments in infrastructure and training for local players. From a developmental perspective, Simon McMenemy emphasized that recruiting talented foreign players could benefit Indonesia if integrated into a long-term football growth strategy [15].

Technically, naturalized players are valued for their superior skills compared to average local players. Many bring attributes such as strength in aerial duels, extraordinary stamina, or tactical versatility, which add depth and new dimensions to the national team. Their enthusiasm when wearing the national jersey is also seen as an asset, and in the domestic league, naturalized players are often highly sought after due to their perceived quality. Consequently, they command salaries on par with local stars or even international players, making them the first-choice recruits for clubs seeking to strengthen their squads.

However, this practice carries risks. Financially, the high salaries of naturalized players increase the burden on clubs, while technically, excessive recruitment of such players can reduce opportunities for young local talent. In the long term, this may hinder the development of sustainable youth programs and disrupt the regeneration process of Indonesian football. To balance competitiveness with player development, regulatory measures are necessary. One proposed policy is to limit the number of naturalized players per squad—such as allowing a maximum of two naturalized players in League 1 and one in Leagues 2 and 3. Such restrictions would help clubs manage financial sustainability while ensuring that young Indonesian players continue to have opportunities for development [16].

Table 4. Quality of the National Team

| Year      | Event                        | Achievement                           |
|-----------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 2010-2014 | AFF Suzuki                   | Runner Up                             |
| 2014-2018 | AFF Suzuki                   | Runner Up                             |
| 2018-2022 | 2020 U-23 Asian Cup          | Failed to qualify for the final round |
|           | 2022 World Cup Qualifiers    | Failed to pass the qualifying round   |
| 2022-2024 | SEA Games 2023               | Champion 1 U-23                       |
|           | 2023 Asian Cup Qualification | Qualify for the 2023 Asian Cup finals |

Based on Table 4, the quality of the Indonesian national football team has shown measurable improvement in recent years. Whereas Indonesia once frequently ended as runner-up, today the national team has successfully qualified for the AFC Asian Cup Finals and is on course to qualify for the 2026 FIFA World Cup. These achievements are partly attributed to the contributions of naturalized players, though the citizenship of footballers continues to spark controversy in Indonesia.

Opposition to naturalization often rests on concerns of nationalism and fears that it may undermine opportunities for local players. Supporters, on the other hand, argue that

naturalization enhances the quality of the national team and elevates Indonesia's competitiveness on the international stage. This debate reflects a deeper tension between ethnic or primordial nationalism, which emphasizes bloodline and emotional attachment to the homeland, and civic nationalism, which embraces inclusivity, citizenship, and shared values. Indonesian society has gradually become more open to naturalized players, even among older generations who once strongly upheld ethnic nationalism. This shift reflects the evolution of ideas about national identity towards a more inclusive and global outlook [17].

The meaning of defending the nation (*bela negara*) is not limited to military defense, but encompasses the determination, attitude, and collective action of citizens to safeguard sovereignty and national integrity based on love of the homeland, adherence to Pancasila, and loyalty to the 1945 Constitution (Azhar, 2001:32). In this sense, football can be interpreted as a form of national defense in the cultural domain, where young athletes bring honor to Indonesia through sports achievements. However, the expansion of naturalization has also shifted from strengthening the national team to serving club interests, often driven by career opportunities and financial motives [1].

Since the 2010 AFF Cup, naturalization has diversified the composition of the Indonesian squad. Cristian Gonzales pioneered this process, followed by other players of Indonesian descent, such as Sergio van Dijk, Raphael Maitimo, and Kim Jeffrey Kurniawan, as well as players with no ancestral ties to Indonesia, such as Greg Nwokolo and Bio Paulin. The process itself is far from simple, requiring five years of consecutive residency, fluency in Bahasa Indonesia, and renunciation of other citizenships. For many athletes, however, naturalization is more than a professional decision—it represents a genuine sense of belonging and commitment. Bio Paulin, for example, had to obtain approval from his family in Cameroon before naturalizing, demonstrating the depth of personal sacrifice involved [3].

The Indonesian government has also introduced stricter policies to ensure naturalization serves national rather than individual or club interests. Minister of Youth and Sports Dito Ariotedjo stressed that naturalization must remain a short-term solution and prioritized for diaspora players of Indonesian descent. He emphasized its benefits, including raising the quality of competition, instilling professionalism, and enhancing Indonesia's FIFA ranking, which improved from 175 to 134. These policies contributed to the team's advancement to the round of 16 in the 2024 AFC Asian Cup and its historic fourth-place finish in the 2024 U23 Asian Cup, reinforcing Indonesia's ambition to qualify for the 2026 World Cup [4].

Meanwhile, former Minister of Youth and Sports Zainudin Amali argued for tightening the process further, citing cases where naturalized players such as Elkan Baggott and Marc Klok hesitated to represent Indonesia in international competitions. He warned that patriotism and nationalism must be non-negotiable prerequisites, urging PSSI to prioritize the development of local players as outlined in the National Sports Grand Design (DBON) [5].

In practice, naturalization has yielded mixed outcomes. On one hand, under the leadership of Erick Thohir and coach Shin Tae-yong, the policy has produced tangible improvements in Indonesia's football performance. On the other, it raises enduring concerns about reliance on foreign-born players and the risk of sidelining grassroots talent. This mirrors global trends, where countries like Brazil, Germany, and Spain have embraced naturalized or diaspora players—examples include Brazilian-born stars Anderson Luís de Souza (*Deco*) for Portugal and Diego Costa for Spain [6]. Thus, Indonesia's naturalization policy is both a reflection of modern football's transnational dynamics and a test of how nationalism and citizenship are redefined in the globalized era of sports.

## Conclusion

Football remains one of the most popular sports in Indonesia, and the naturalization of foreign players has become a central policy issue since 2010. Under Law No. 12 of 2006 on Indonesian Citizenship, foreigners who render services to the state or whose presence serves the national interest may obtain Indonesian citizenship through an expedited process. This provision has enabled numerous foreign athletes to represent Indonesia at the international level. However, the outcomes have been mixed. In the 2016 AFF Cup, Alfred Riedl expressed disappointment with naturalized players who failed to meet expectations. By contrast, under the leadership of Shin Tae-yong, the naturalization program has been more selective, prioritizing athletes of Indonesian descent and aiming to fill critical gaps in the squad.

While critics argue that naturalization risks limiting opportunities for local talent, the achievements of the national team in recent years suggest otherwise. The Indonesian squad has progressed from being a consistent runner-up to qualifying for the AFC Asian Cup Finals and reaching the final qualifying round for the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Tangible successes of the Shin Tae-yong era include raising Indonesia's FIFA ranking from 175 to 134, advancing to the round of 16 in the 2024 Asian Cup, and achieving a historic fourth-place finish in the 2024 U23 Asian Cup. These results indicate that naturalized players have made significant contributions to strengthening the national team.

Nevertheless, naturalization must not be viewed as a long-term solution. Sustainable football development requires balancing short-term performance gains with long-term investments in grassroots programs, youth academies, and infrastructure to nurture local talent. Naturalization can serve as a complementary strategy, but the ultimate goal must remain the empowerment of Indonesian footballers to represent their country with skill, pride, and a strong sense of national identity.

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