

Abdurrahman Wahid's Cosmopolitanism in the Protection of Religious Freedom in Indonesia: Policy Analysis and Implementation Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia as a pluralistic country faces challenges in ensuring religious freedom in the midst of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. Although various studies have discussed pluralism and are associated with the thought of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), studies that specifically link the concept of cosmopolitanism with the implementation of public policies in the protection of religious freedom are still limited. This research aims to analyze the concept of Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism and its implementation in public policy and the challenges faced in the context in Indonesia. This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method, utilizing primary sources in the form of Gus Dur's writings and policies as well as secondary sources from relevant academic literature. Data analysis was carried out through content analysis techniques to interpret Gus Dur's ideas and policies in the socio-political context of Indonesia. The results of the study show that Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism is reflected in concrete policies such as the revocation of discriminatory regulations against the Confucian community and his defense of minority groups. However, the implementation of these values faces structural, political, and cultural challenges. This research confirms that Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism is relevant as a normative foundation in strengthening democracy and tolerance in Indonesia.

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1. Introduction

Freedom of religion is one of the fundamental and universally recognized human rights (Doni & Susilo, 2024). This right reflects the dignity of every individual to determine spiritual beliefs without discrimination. This statement is the foundation of international law that serves as a reference for UN member states that religious freedom is a comprehensive right (UN, 1948). Indonesia as a legal country based on Pancasila guarantees freedom of religion for every citizen. Article 29 of the Constitution Paragraph 2 emphasizes that the state guarantees the freedom of each citizen to embrace their respective religions to worship according to their respective religions and beliefs (BPHN, 1945). Indonesia as a pluralistic country with various ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity faces challenges in maintaining interreligious harmony. This diversity has become an inevitable reality and is recognized as an integral part of the nation's life (Safitri, 2024). This diversity, in Gus Dur's view, is part of human nature that must be respected, not a threat. This difference should be seen as a source of strength and a cultural wealth that can enrich social life (Faturahman et al., 2024; Putra et al., 2023; Weda et al., 2022).

Maintaining the unity and integrity of the nation in the midst of diversity is very crucial for Indonesia. Indonesia as a pluralistic country faces challenges in maintaining its unity. This diversity, if not managed properly, will have the potential to cause prolonged tension and conflict. Therefore, it is important to have tolerance and mutual respect between communities. The Indonesian constitution, which emphasizes Pancasila as the basis of the state, contains universal values that can unite various elements of society regardless of ethnic, cultural, or religious background. (Laden & Sari, 2025; Sujoko et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2019). By integrating the values of Pancasila, the community is expected to build solidarity to create an inclusive and peaceful environment. However, in forming a peaceful environment, there are challenges in maintaining interreligious harmony with the emergence of tensions, conflicts and discrimination of religious differences. During the New Order period, discrimination occurred against the Chinese (Aryani, 2022). The government banned all forms of Chinese cultural expression, including Confucian religious practices, Chinese New Year celebrations, and the use of the Chinese script. Many Chinese people are under pressure to hide their cultural and religious identity to

avoid stigmatization. Ahmadis are another religious minority group that also experiences discrimination (Hidayatulloh, 2018). Most Muslims consider this school to be deviant because of its beliefs about prophethood after the Prophet Muhammad. As a result, Ahmadis are often victims of persecution including attacks on mosques, bans on worship activities, and expulsion of communities from their homes.

In this context, cosmopolitanism is a view that emphasizes awareness of diversity, especially in relation to the protection of religious freedom (Habibullah, 2022). In addition, cosmopolitanism also emphasizes the importance of seeing human beings as human beings regardless of identity background in order to create a world through tolerance. One of the important figures who pushed the concept of cosmopolitanism in Indonesia was Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur (Siswanto & Fakhruddin, 2022). Gus Dur is an influential cleric and kiai who once led the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and also served as the 4th President of the Republic of Indonesia. His strong Islamic education background and the historiography of his life in the pesantren have shaped him into a figure with extensive and comprehensive Islamic knowledge. Gus Dur is known as a defender of the "weakened group," not only minorities in numbers, but also those who are marginalized (Basyir, 2016). He consistently fought for the rights of religious minorities, including non-Sunni Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and other faiths. Concrete examples of his struggle include repealing discriminatory regulations against ethnic Chinese, defending Ahmadiyah, and engaging in conflict resolution in Maluku and Poso (Aqsa et al., 2015; Mahdori et al., 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2026).

Through his thoughts on cosmopolitan Islam, Gus Dur emphasized the importance of contextual, moderate, and upholding religious teachings that are contextual, moderate, and uphold human values. He stated that cultural and religious plurality is the strength of the nation and that everyone has the right to freedom of religion and belief without coercion or discrimination (Zahrotinnisa & Fani, 2025). This view is not only in line with the principles of human rights but also with the state principle of Pancasila. Gus Dur sees cosmopolitanism from the perspective of Indonesian religious pluralism that emphasizes respect for religious freedom, tolerance, and interfaith discussion.

However, Gus Dur's policies are inseparable from challenges and criticism, both from conservative groups and from those who feel disturbed by the pluralism efforts that he is fighting for. Nevertheless, Gus Dur remains firm in his belief that Indonesia must become a country that is able to accommodate diversity and that peace can be created through dialogue and cooperation between religious communities.

Several previous studies have examined Gus Dur's thoughts which are associated with several aspects such as research (Maghfuri, 2015), explained that Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism could be implicated in Islamic education in Indonesia. Further research by (Fauzi, 2019) which explains that Islamic universalism and cosmopolitanism of Islamic civilization that carry the mission of humanity are appropriate for Muslims to play an active role in realizing the character of cosmopolitanism in the contemporary era. Further research by (Abidin, 2012) which explains that plurality in the Gus Dur era emphasizes tolerance that respects differences in religion or belief in Indonesia. Therefore, from the study, there is a research gap that the integration between the concept of Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism and the implementation of public policies in the protection of religious freedom in Indonesia has not been comprehensively studied in previous research. In this case, the formulation of the problem emerges, namely how does Gus Dur apply the principle of cosmopolitanism in his policies and attitudes towards religious diversity in Indonesia?.

2. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach that produces descriptive data. Qualitative research methods are research methods whose key instruments are in the researcher (Utami & Hidayat, 2021). This research is in the form of data and is not carried out through measurement or statistics. Data collected by the authors with Library Research. Data analysis in this study uses content analysis techniques Content Analysis which is carried out through the stage of data reduction, categorization based on themes, and interpretation of data according to the theoretical framework. To maintain the validity of the data, source triangulation was used by comparing various literature such as Gus Dur's writings, government policies, and scientific journals. In addition, cross-checks are carried out between sources to ensure the consistency and credibility of the data. The purpose of this research is to understand Gus Dur in applying cosmopolitanism in his policies and attitudes towards religious diversity in Indonesia. The data sources used by the author came from journals, theses, news portals, and official websites. The author collects data for selection of previous research which is then processed into research results. The author uses a time limit from 1999-2001. The author chose this time span because that year was the period of Gus Dur's leadership where in the era of his government, he provided views related to equality and human diversity. This research has a contribution both theoretically and practically. The novelty of this research lies in the integrative analysis between Gus Dur's cosmopolitan concept and its implementation in public policy related to the protection of

religious freedom, which has rarely been comprehensively studied in previous research. This research can enrich the literature on cosmopolitanism as a universal value that can be a reference for policymakers in formulating policies that are fair to minority groups. Thus, this research not only contributes to academic development but also provides direction in strengthening harmonious democracy in Indonesia.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Gus Dur's Cosmopolitanism Thoughts

Gus Dur defines cosmopolitanism as a view that transcends the narrow boundaries of identity and emphasizes the fundamental equality of all human beings (Siswanto & Fakhruddin, 2022). This is not just a concept but an ethics that is embodied in real actions. Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism is seen as recognition and respect for various identities such as race, ethnicity, religion, and culture regardless of their background. Gus Dur's foundation is in line with the religion of Islam which is rooted in the principles "Takhallqu bi Akhlaq Allah" which means to behave with the morals of Allah in question, which is to encourage humans to respect and love each other as Allah respects and loves His creation. (Iqbal Firdaus, 2021). In this case, Gus Dur's idea of cosmopolitanism is Ukhuwah insaniyyah or universal brotherhood that transcends boundaries (Nafi'a, 2020). Gus Dur believes that this concept is the teaching of the ancestors who strongly fight for pluralism who consider the diversity of the universe to be the majesty of God and humans should not hinder other humans in terms of thinking, language, and each other's desires (Hidden, 2024). Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism can be understood as a natural extension of humanism that centers on humanizing human beings and sees humanity as the core of religion. In this case, Gus Dur reinterpreted it as a sharia goal which is not a way to get out of Islam but as a way to maintain religion to defend freedom of religion and belief. This interpretation shows that the teachings of Islam can be a strong foundation for human beings universally by affirming that the welfare of humans is the goal of the core of religion.

In addition, Gus Dur's thoughts on the indigenous people of Islam and Islam of the archipelago reflect his commitment to the principles of Moderate Islam. This thinking emphasizes tolerance, local wisdom, and the integration of Islamic values with Indonesian culture to fight radicalism (Fuadi et al., 2024). This approach is in line with a cosmopolitanism that values locality and wider togetherness. In this case, Gus Dur advocated dialogue between cultures and religions as in his discussion with Daisaku Ikeda who explored the similarities between Buddhism and Islam (A. Wahid, 2015). This dialogue aims to foster peace that emphasizes the importance of tolerance and non-violence. Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism involves tolerance of pluralism and cultural exchange. Gus Dur's movement in combining traditional and modern Islamic studies is to promote a progressive understanding of Islam and support democracy (Barton et al., 2021). His leadership has made a significant contribution to Indonesia's transition from authoritarianism to democracy, demonstrating that Islam can be in harmony with democratic and pluralistic values.

Gus Dur's way of thinking was manifested through his ideology at the time of leading Indonesia, which was believed to be in accordance with Indonesia's intolerant social environment (Sukirman & Abdullah, 2021). Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism influenced his political decisions and actions through his often controversial leadership style, language, and policies in Indonesia. The younger generation in the Gusdurian network has preserved its ideology through various means such as discussion forums, caring actions, and criticism of the sovereign government (Rijaal, 2021). Gus Dur believes that religious differences are things that must be accepted and not eliminated. In this regard, he opposes all forms of discrimination against minority groups such as Ahmadiyah, Chinese, and other religions. During the New Order, Chinese groups who adhered to the Confucian religion experienced discrimination with the existence of Presidential Instruction No. 14/1967 which prohibited the Chinese from expressing their culture in public spaces, including the use of the Chinese script, Chinese New Year celebrations, and Confucian religious practices. They are often forced to assimilate with the majority culture so that their religious and cultural identities are suppressed. In this case, Gus Dur lifted the ban on Chinese New Year celebrations in 2001 and recognized Confucianism as the official religion. Gus Dur showed his respect for Chinese culture. In addition, Gus Dur also defended minority groups such as Ahmadiyya and encouraged interfaith dialogue to prevent conflicts. His controversial but impactful leadership style and policies often challenge the status quo to encourage a more inclusive and tolerant society (Sahfutra, 2014).

Gus Dur's cosmopolitan perspective was shaped by a global view that led to Africa due to his understanding of the interdependence between people of African descent and whites, so this perspective could influence his leadership style and his approach to international relations. Gus Dur strongly believes in the compatibility of Islam with a pluralistic political culture. This is done through his leadership through Nahdlatul Ulama which advocates for the community to respect various religious and cultural groups (Franklin, 2024). In addition, the emergence of the Ahmadiyya movement that seeks to establish an Islamic state is opposed by Gus Dur on the grounds that democracy and pluralism must be the basis of the

state. This attitude is rooted in his commitment to equal rights and freedom of religion in accordance with Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution (Ghofur, 2017). Ahmadiyya is considered a group that deviates from Islam by many major scholars because it believes in the existence of a prophet after the Prophet Muhammad. As a result, they were discriminated against, mosques were burned, worship activities were banned, and physical assaults by intolerant groups were some examples of persecution experienced by the Ahmadiyya. Although it was unconstitutional and allowed by the state, the local government even issued a decree banning Ahmadiyya activities. Gus Dur is one of the figures who openly defends Ahmadiyya and emphasizes that the state does not have the right to determine one's beliefs. Gus Dur also emphasized that Ahmadiyya people have the right to live safely, worship, and have the same civil rights as other citizens. He demanded that the state punish the perpetrators of violence rather than sacrifice the victim by restricting their religious activities.

Gus Dur's vision for Indonesian society is to create a harmonious society that embraces diversity using various media and state diplomacy (Anis et al., 2016). At the time of his election, Gus Dur made diplomatic efforts with Israel. Although Indonesia is a majority Muslim country and does not have diplomatic relations with Israel because of the Palestinian issue, he sees the importance of dialogue and peace. In 1994 Gus Dur was invited by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to witness the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan (Suharningtyas, 2014). According to him, this is not a lack of concern for Palestine but an effort to open dialogue for the sake of creating peace and justice.

Most people believe that Gus Dur's ideology is the right way to overcome intolerance of religious and cultural diversity in Indonesia. Especially during crises such as pandemics, this approach is preserved and promoted through various forums, peaceful actions, and community awareness initiatives (Abdullah, 2021). He emphasized the importance of multiculturalism that includes religious diversity, and sought to expand its scope to allow multireligious people to live in Indonesia (Hoon, 2017). Cosmopolitan Islamic intellectuals, who combined international power with political patriotism, influenced Gus Dur's policies. In promoting religious diversity, an approach known as cosmopatriotism combines global and national perspectives. His efforts to create unity in diversity are a strong principle in Indonesian history and culture (Tho Seeth, 2023).

3.2. The Impact and Relevance of Gus Dur's Thought

Gus Dur's thoughts have a significant impact on the formation of tolerance and harmony in Indonesia. Gus Dur is recognized as the "Father of Indonesian Pluralism" for his contribution to promoting tolerance in the midst of a pluralistic Indonesian society. In accordance with the principle of Gus Dur who views ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity in Indonesia as a gift and not a source of division so that it can change the views of Indonesian people (S. H. Wahid et al., 2025). Gus Dur has a vision for the Muslim community in Indonesia by emphasizing peace and harmony in the midst of diversity. His leadership aims to create Indonesian society so that it is able to coexist peacefully and cannot be divided. This is often referred to as the Muslim Brotherhood (Anis & Yuliarti, 2016). In addition, Indonesian cosmopolitan Islamic intellectuals whose thinking was influenced by Gus Dur often formed a "cosmopatriotism" that blended cosmopolitan ideals with a strong national identity to reflect global interactions (Tho Seeth, 2023).

Gus Dur's thinking also substantially contributed to the defense of human rights and democracy. In human rights, Gus Dur's perspective adopts a *uviversalis* that views human rights as a value inherent in every individual regardless of ethnic, religious, or social status (Samsudin & Nurbaya, 2022). This approach rejects forms of discrimination and promotes the fulfillment of civil rights in politics, economics, social, and culture. His defense of ethnic Chinese and Ahmadiyya is a manifestation of a universalist commitment that places humanity as the highest parameter in policies and actions. In addition, the relationship between human rights and democracy is reciprocal so that he understands that a government system that guarantees the participation of the people and the rule of law is the main thing in the enforcement of human rights (Narendra & Abidin, 2022). The form of democracy that he wants is to side with the marginalized and provide a balance between individual rights and responsibilities. His contribution to Indonesia's post-New Order political transition was very brief but showed efforts to build better democratic institutions by prioritizing the protection of human rights.

The Gusdurian network inspired by Gus Dur's ideology has played an important role by mobilizing social awareness actions during the pandemic by showing the strength of the community in dealing with disasters and distributing aid to various regions (S. H. Wahid et al., 2025). This is in accordance with Gus Dur's principle related to universality. Gus Dur's thoughts have contributed to the development of religious tolerance in multicultural villages in Indonesia by emphasizing the role of cultural traditions, social norms, and local leaders in promoting tolerance and fostering harmony between religious communities. Islamic organizations in Indonesia, influenced by Gus Dur's thoughts, support civil society, democracy, and a reputation for tolerance in the midst of the rapidly growing diversity in Indonesia. This shows the implications for democracy in Indonesia and the wider Muslim world. This principle has inspired the City of Salatiga by

accepting the existence of a community other than Islam by implementing various policies and strategies to promote acceptance of diversity, which resulted in a high score in the Tolerant City Index. Indonesia's diverse political and cultural context necessitates fostering tolerance and nonviolence for social stability, with nationalism and respect for local wisdom playing an important role in the relationship between religious tolerance and nonviolence. The city of Tomohon in North Sulawesi maintains tolerance because of the strong values contained in local wisdom, showing the importance of local wisdom in building an atmosphere of tolerance in the community.

3.3. Challenge

Gus Dur faced the biggest challenge when he implemented policies that adhered to the principles of pluralism and cosmopolitanism. Conservative and intolerant organizations feel that inclusive policies will threaten them. For example, he is often considered to be against the majority of Muslims because of his advocacy of Ahmadiyah, Shia, and local faith groups. There are many people who openly oppose him and even accuse him of supporting heresy. In addition, Gus Dur faced resistance from some powerful people in politics and bureaucracy who continued to follow the way of thinking inherited from the New Order. This way of thinking has for years restricted the expression of certain religions and cultures such as Confucianism and ethnic Chinese. After revoking Presidential Instruction No. 14/1967 and restoring the civil rights of the Chinese community, including official recognition of Confucianism, he was accused of weakening the nation's Islamic identity or supporting certain minority groups. In addition, his efforts to empower minority groups are often seen politically as a controversial move that threatens the current state of affairs. Despite the difficulties, Gus Dur remained steadfast in his belief that the state must protect all its citizens, not just the majority, and that justice can only be achieved if everyone is treated equally and with dignity.

The role of the media in exacerbating conflict and intolerance is another challenge faced by Gus Dur. At that time, Indonesian media, especially radio, had created a complex environment for cosmopolitan development. The issue of mass media often runs with political and economic interests that can divide society and cause information bias (Stuart & Stuart, 2024). The cosmopolitanism carried out by Gus Dur requires literacy and a deep understanding from the community. Gus Dur's complex and philosophical explanation of human responsibility is often difficult to accept widely. At the time Gus Dur spoke about defending human rights universally and the importance of dialogue was often considered to be contrary to national interests or certain religious beliefs. This limited understanding complicates new ideas about the world's citizens who care about humanity universally. In addition, the emergence of divisive narratives easily spreads in societies that have low literacy (Prastyo, 2022). Sensitive issues related to pluralism and differences of belief are difficult to accept and understand by society. Gus Dur's philosophical thinking is difficult to accept by the public because it is considered to reduce national identity. This gap is also exacerbated by the lack of education received by the Indonesian people.

Related to culture, cultural particularity is an obstacle because Indonesia is known for its ethnic diversity and customs so that community groups still adhere to local norms, values, and traditions. In this context, views that emphasize the equality of human dignity beyond tribal or regional boundaries are often difficult to accept and can even be considered a threat to local identity. In addition, people still view cultural traditions as a heritage that must be maintained and reject external influences. Gus Dur, who encourages dialogue between civilizations and the adaptation of universal values, clashes with this view. He sees culture as a dynamic entity that can enrich itself from the outside without losing its essence but this idea is often rejected as a threat to ancestral heritage. The existence of hierarchy in culture is also a challenge because majority cultures sometimes underestimate minority cultures. Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism opposes this hierarchy and calls for the equality of dignity of each culture, however, changing the mindset about cultural superiority requires persistent education and advocacy and often faces resistance from the established cultural power structures.

4. Conclusion

Indonesia as a pluralistic country faces great challenges in maintaining harmony between religious communities in the midst of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. Historically, discrimination against minority groups such as Chinese and Ahmadiyah shows that plurality is often accompanied by conflict and oppression. It is in this context that Abdurrahman Wahid's (Gus Dur) thoughts and policies become very relevant. Gus Dur applies the principle of cosmopolitanism by emphasizing the importance of tolerance, religious freedom, and respect for human rights regardless of religious background. Through concrete steps such as the revocation of Presidential Instruction No. 14/1967 and his defense of minority groups, Gus Dur has shown his commitment to pluralism and social justice. Despite receiving a lot of rejection from conservative groups and status quo politicians, Gus Dur remains consistent in fighting for an inclusive Indonesia that respects diversity. His thinking about cosmopolitan Islam became an important foundation for the creation of a peaceful,

just, and mutually respectful society in the state of Pancasila. However, in its implementation, there were challenges from conservative groups and the New Order bureaucracy, as well as the difficulty of accepting his philosophical ideas amid low public literacy and divisive media influence. The challenge also comes from the strong cultural particularism in Indonesia where local traditions are often considered to be at odds with the universalist view promoted by cosmopolitanism. Nevertheless, Gus Dur remains firm in his belief that the state must protect all its citizens equally and make humanity the highest parameter in policy. This study has limitations because it only uses a literature study without empirical data and is limited to the period 1999–2001. Therefore, further research is recommended to use an empirical approach such as interviews and examine the relevance of Gus Dur's cosmopolitanism in a contemporary context so that the research results are more comprehensive.

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