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## Abdurrahman Wahid, democratic reformer and advocate of civil Islam, dies

By Michael Allen on December 30, 2009



Wahid was a staunch and eloquent advocate of democracy, civil society and moderate Islam

Former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, who presided over the country's early [tumultuous years of democracy](#), has died at the age of 69.

Wahid, known by his nickname Gus Dur, was a democratic reformer and advocate of moderate Islam. As leader of the 40-million-member Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, Wahid [promoted interfaith dialogue](#) and defied radical critics to visit Israel in October 1994.

"He was against political Islam as a concept," [said Robin Bush](#), Indonesia country representative for the Asia Foundation. "He was one of the greatest thinkers and philosophers of Islam in Indonesia."

A proponent of [Civil Islam](#), he fought [radical attempts to politicize the NU](#) in the 1980s and 1990s at a time when Muslim groups were struggling to contain [Saudi-funded Wahhabi elements](#) advocating the implementation of Shariah law.

Wahid "was one of the [biggest promoters of the \[civil society\] movement](#)," according to Sidney Jones, a Jakarta-based analyst for the International Crisis Group.

A co-founder of the [LibforAll anti-extremism network](#), he explained the rationale for mainstream Muslims' efforts to combat Islamist ideology in a [Wall Street Journal](#) article:

*Muslims themselves can and must propagate an understanding of the 'right' Islam, and thereby discredit extremist ideology. Yet to accomplish this task requires the understanding and support of like-minded individuals, organizations and governments throughout the world. Our goal must be to illuminate the hearts and minds of humanity, and offer a compelling alternate vision of Islam, one that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged.*

A vocal critic of Suharto in the dictator's final years in power, Wahid was installed as president following a [backroom deal](#) in October 1999, but struggled to assert his authority against "unelected powerbrokers, including a disgruntled military that resisted civilian control."

He tried to establish a truth and reconciliation commission to investigate political killings and disappearances during Suharto's 32-year rule, but he was consistently frustrated, not least by the still-powerful military.

Despite the lack of substantive achievements in office, if the initial tributes following his death are any indication, he will be remembered as "a truly [fearless defender of Indonesia's traditions of decency, tolerance, pluralism and constitutionalism](#)."

<http://www.demdigest.net/blog/ngoscivil-society/abdurrahman-wahid-democratic-reformer-and-advocate-of-civil-islam-dies.html>