Ex-President Gus Dur’s vision for democratic Islam in Indonesia

Seven years since he passed away, Indonesia’s former President Gus Dur is still a constant figure in people’s minds. Some would use him as a target of hate, but many regard him as a hero, says his daughter Alissa Wahid.

The fourth president of Indonesia, Abdurrahman Wahid, popularly known as Gus Dur, remains an enduring personality in the country’s public conscience even years after his death. His tomb in a small city in East Java is visited by more than 1.5 million people annually.

Indeed, it is a tradition for people from Nahdlatul Ulama (the biggest Indonesian Muslim organization with its 60 million members) to visit tombs of respected clerics, but Gus Dur’s tomb is the only one visited by people from all walks of life and religions: Buddhist monks, Catholic nuns and priests, Hindu pedandes, Chinese, urbanites and villagers, and punk group bands.
Whenever asked “Why do all these people love him so much?” Muslim scholar Mustafa Bisri, Gus Dur’s best friend, answered, “Because he loved those people that much.”

It’s a simple explanation, but when carried out by a larger-than-life character of a leader, it leads to changes and social transformation. He was also the long-term chairperson to Nahdlatul Ulama, bringing the organization to its most progressive period with its trademark on inclusive Islam and support for democracy.

Establishing civilian supremacy

Gus Dur was the first president to be freely elected by an Indonesian parliament. His presidency lasted only 2 years, but it left the legacies of a strong democracy. He successfully established civilian supremacy by demilitarizing civilian positions after the demise of President Suharto’s military New Order regime. State agencies to ensure strong democracy like the Constitutional Court, Anti-Corruption Commission, Judicial Commission and Ombudsman were part of his priorities.

The only one dropped by his successors was the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation for Past Human Rights Abuses, leaving past tragedies and others unresolved until now.

Mainstreaming gender in every public policy was put as presidential decree, the same with protection for workers rights, both domestic and foreign. The Papuans acknowledge him as the president that gave back the name Papua as their dignified identity, revoking the name Irian given after annexation in 1967. During President Gus Dur’s era, military operations were ceased, exchanged with support to congress for the Papuan people to the dismay of the Indonesian military.

Read more: Indonesia goes after Islamists - finally

The Chinese communities refer to the Chinese New Year’s Day as Gus Dur’s Day, and in many Indonesian Chinese temples, his name or portrait is hung among those of the elderlies and gods. They honor him for his policy on revoking the banning of Chinese cultural expressions imposed in 1967. Now, the Indonesian Chinese people are free to express themselves.
Islam and democracy

Not everything was wine and roses though. Gus Dur was opposed especially by Islamists, with their ideals of a more “Islamic” Indonesia, the Indonesian military for their loss of power as well as the oligarchs.

He finally lost the political contestations, deciding to step down when thousands of his followers started to come to Jakarta to defend him. His famous words ending his presidency were, “There is no power worth defending by bloodshed of the people.”

These policies and affirmative actions come from his firm beliefs in Islam and democracy. He believed in the universalism of Islam: That Islam has in its core the values of human dignity, and democracy, with all its limitations, is the best political ideology to ensure it. He wrote, “Democracy is not only not haram [forbidden] in Islam, but is a compulsory element of Islam. Upholding democracy is one of the principles of Islam.”

He also repeatedly quoted one of the legal maxims for Islamic jurisprudence: “tasharuf al-imam ala al-raiyah manuthun bi al-maslahat” (the policies of a leader are strongly depended to achieve the welfare of his people).

With so many legacies, it is not a surprise that Gus Dur is loved by the Indonesian people, and still influences Indonesia today. At a time when the world is challenged by Islamism and Islamophobia, Gus Dur’s views and works would be a source of inspiration that indeed Islam is part of the world, and can play its vital role to fulfill the dream of the Prophet Muhammad: Islam is a blessing for the universe (Islam Rahmatan li al-Alamin).

Alissa Wahid is the daughter of Gus Dur. She is also the founder and national coordinator of Gusdurian Network, a vast network of activists in Indonesia that engages thousands of activists and supporters and focuses on values of humanity, justice, liberation (of any oppression), and peace. Currently, the network is working on issues of multiculturalism, democracy, and human rights.