

## GOVERNING RELIGIOUS IDENTITY: STATE POLICY AND THE CONVERGENCE OF MUHAMMADIYAH AND NAHDLATUL ULAMA

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### Abstract

*This study examines how contemporary state policies are transforming the traditions and identities of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and how both organisations are responding to and negotiating these changes in public life. Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, Talal Asad's thesis on the state's construction of 'religion', and coercive isomorphism, this qualitative study—comprising interviews, observation and document analysis—examines policies such as religious moderation, the Pancasila ideology and the regulation of civil society organisations. The findings indicate that the state acts not only as a regulator but also as a normative and discursive force that limits the legitimacy of religious practices; the identities of Muhammadiyah and NU tend to converge towards the state-sanctioned discourse of 'moderate and nationalist Islam', although both continue to adaptively preserve their traditional characteristics. This research enriches the theory of religion-state relations by highlighting the governmental and discursive dimensions of religious regulation.*

**Keywords:** Religious Governance; Governmentality; Institutional Isomorphism; Muhammadiyah; Nahdlatul Ulama

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana kebijakan negara kontemporer mentransformasi tradisi dan identitas Muhammadiyah dan Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), serta bagaimana kedua organisasi merespons dan menegosiasikan perubahan itu dalam kehidupan publik. Berangkat dari governmentalitas Foucault, tesis Talal Asad tentang konstruksi "agama" oleh negara, dan isomorfisme koersif, studi kualitatif—wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen—menelaah kebijakan seperti moderasi beragama, ideologi Pancasila, dan pengaturan organisasi kemasyarakatan. Temuan menunjukkan negara berperan bukan hanya sebagai regulator tetapi juga sebagai kekuatan normatif dan diskursif yang membatasi sahnya praktik keagamaan; identitas Muhammadiyah dan NU cenderung berkonvergensi ke wacana "Islam moderat dan nasionalis" yang disetujui negara, meski keduanya tetap mempertahankan ciri tradisionalnya secara adaptif. Penelitian ini memperkaya teori hubungan agama-negara dengan menonjolkan dimensi governmental dan diskursif regulasi keagamaan.

**Kata Kunci:** Tata Kelola Keagamaan; Governmentalitas; Isomorfisme Institusional; Muhammadiyah; Nahdlatul Ulama

## **INTRODUCTION**

The relationship between religious traditions and the state is an important issue in religious studies today, especially in a country with a high level of religiosity such as Indonesia. In the modern context, religion is no longer understood solely as a doctrinal system, but as a living social practice that continues to interact with power structures, public policies, and societal dynamics (Maksum, & Kholish, 2025). The state, in this case, functions not only as an administrative regulator, but also as an actor that has the capacity to shape, direct, and even transform religious practices and identities in public life. Therefore, the study of the relationship between religious traditions and state policies is important to understand how religion operates in social spaces and how these interactions impact the harmony and stability of society (Gusman et al., 2025).

In the Indonesian context, the relationship between religion and the state is experiencing increasingly complex dynamics, especially in the era of the Joko Widodo administration. The government has issued a number of policies that are directly in contact with the religious life of the community, such as the dissolution of religious organizations, the strengthening of religious moderation programs, and the regulation of religious expression in public spaces (Triana, 2024). These policies not only have an impact on institutional aspects, but also affect daily religious practices and the construction of people's religious identities. In this context, religious traditions are not static, but undergo a process of adaptation and transformation in response to state policies. This shows that the interaction between the state and religion is a dynamic process, involving negotiations between religious values, political interests, and social realities (Faturahman & Berakon, 2025).

Theoretically, this study draws on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality to understand how state power operates beyond formal regulation (Foucault, 2007). Governmentality refers to the techniques and rationalities through which modern states shape the conduct of individuals and institutions by producing norms, discourses, and standards of acceptable behaviour. In the context of religion, state policies do not merely regulate religious life but actively construct the conditions under which religion is practiced, expressed, and recognized in the public sphere (Asad, 2003).

This perspective is complemented by Talal Asad's argument that religion in modern nation-states is not an autonomous sphere existing independently from political authority. Rather, the state participates in defining legitimate forms of religion through legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, and public discourses. Religious identity, therefore, should be understood as a socially and politically negotiated category rather than a purely theological construct.

To explain organizational adaptation, this study also employs DiMaggio and Powell's concept of coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Coercive isomorphism occurs when organizations adjust their structures, discourses, and practices in response to pressures exerted by powerful institutions such as the state. In the Indonesian context, policies related to religious moderation, Pancasila, and counter-radicalization may encourage Islamic organizations to adapt their public religious identities while maintaining their distinctive traditions.

Recent studies suggest that religious practices in Indonesia are deeply embedded within broader social and policy contexts. Research by (Imdad et al., 2025), demonstrates that the living Qur'an tradition in maritime communities functions not only as a form of religious expression but also as a practice closely connected to ecological and social dimensions shaped by local policies. Similarly, Faturahman and Berakon (2025) highlight the role of local religious traditions in fostering social spirituality and strengthening community harmony. Beyond religious practices, faith-based organizations also play a strategic role in mediating relations between the state and society. (Gusman et al., 2025). I argue that religious organizations possess the capacity to shape collective responses to state policies while influencing public religious practices. In the Indonesian context, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama represent two prominent Islamic organizations whose socio-religious influence extends beyond institutional religious functions to the formation of collective religious identities, social cohesion, and community stability. These studies indicate that religious traditions and organizations are not merely cultural or religious phenomena, but also important actors in the negotiation between religion, society, and the state.

Despite their shared influence in Indonesian Islam, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama respond differently to state policies due to their distinct religious traditions and organizational orientations. These differences illustrate that religious identity transformation is shaped not only by state intervention but also by internal institutional dynamics.

Although previous studies have examined religion–state relations in Indonesia, most have focused on political participation, democratization, electoral behaviour, and the role of Islamic organizations in supporting or opposing government agendas. Far less attention has been given to how state policies reshape the religious identities of Islamic organizations themselves. Existing scholarship rarely examines the governmental and discursive mechanisms through which state intervention influences religious self-understanding, organizational adaptation, and identity transformation. Consequently, there remains limited empirical evidence explaining how major Islamic organizations negotiate state-defined norms of acceptable religiosity while preserving their historical traditions.

This study addresses this gap by examining how state policies influence religious identity transformation through the mediating role of religious organizations. In contrast to previous research that emphasized more on normative or political aspects, this study places a focus on socio-religious practices and the dynamics of interaction between the state and society. Using a qualitative approach based on field studies, this study seeks to capture the empirical reality of how religious traditions are negotiated in the context of state policies.

Specifically, this study aims to analyse: (1) how state policies affect religious practices and identities in public life; (2) how Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama respond and negotiate the policy; and (3) how these interactions contribute to the formation of social harmony and community stability. Thus, this research not only makes an academic contribution to the development of religious and state studies, but also provides practical implications for the formulation of public policies that are more sensitive to religious social dynamics.

This study contributes to religion–state scholarship in three ways. First, it extends existing analyses beyond political and institutional dimensions by highlighting the governmental and discursive mechanisms through which state policies shape religious life. Second, it applies the concept of coercive isomorphism to explain how Islamic organizations adapt to state pressure without entirely abandoning their organizational traditions. Third, it provides empirical evidence from elite actors within Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, demonstrating how religious identity transformation emerges through ongoing negotiation between state authority, organizational agency, and socio-religious tradition.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative approach with a field research design to explore the relationship between state policies and the transformation of religious identity among Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia (Hamzah, 2020). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because this study seeks to understand meanings, experiences, and socio-religious practices contextually, particularly regarding how religious organizations interpret, negotiate, and respond to state intervention in public life (Machali, 2021). Given the exploratory nature of this research, qualitative inquiry enabled a deeper understanding of the complex interaction between the state, religious organizations, and social dynamics.

This research adopted a descriptive-analytical design focusing on Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama as the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia. These organizations were selected purposively due to their broad institutional networks, strategic influence in socio-religious life, and active involvement in responding to state policies concerning religious affairs. The study was conducted in Jakarta between 2024 and 2025, particularly at the central organizational level, because official institutional responses and policy positions are predominantly formulated at the national headquarters.

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants considered relevant to the research objectives. Five key informants were involved: Anwar Abbas and Sudarnoto Abdul Hakim from Muhammadiyah, as well as Rumadi Ahmad, Suedy, and Ulil Abshar Abdalla from Nahdlatul Ulama. These participants were selected based on three criteria: (1) their formal position within the organization, (2) their direct involvement in religious and public policy discourse, and (3) their expertise and experience in issues concerning religion-state relations in Indonesia. Their backgrounds enabled the researcher to obtain comprehensive and institutionally grounded perspectives regarding organizational responses to state policies.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to provide flexibility in exploring participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of state policies and their implications for religious traditions and identity transformation. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and supported by interview guidelines focused on themes such as religious moderation, state intervention, public religious practices, and organizational responses to government policies. Field observations were undertaken to capture socio-religious practices and organizational activities related to public religious life. In addition, documentary analysis was employed to examine government regulations, organizational publications, public statements, and relevant academic literature to contextualize empirical findings (Imdad et al., 2025). Data credibility was ensured through source triangulation and member checking. Data were analysed using thematic analysis through coding, categorization, and theme development to interpret the relationship between state policy and religious identity transformation. It is important to note that all participants were elite-level actors from the central leadership of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. Therefore, the findings primarily reflect organizational perspectives formulated at the national level rather than grassroots religious practices at local levels.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **State Policy on Religious Life in The Era of Joko Widodo**

The relationship between the state and religious life in Indonesia experienced significant dynamics in the era of President Joko Widodo's administration. The state no longer merely functions as an administrative regulator in religious affairs, but also appears as an active actor in shaping the direction of religious practices and expressions in the public sphere. Through various strategic policies, the government seeks to reorganize the relationship between religion and the state with the aim of maintaining national stability, strengthening religious moderation, and responding to increasing polarization based on religious identity (Hamdani, 2020).

One of the most prominent policies was the dissolution of religious organizations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) in 2017 and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in 2020. This policy was taken for the reason of maintaining the integrity of the country and preventing the spread of ideologies that are considered contrary to Pancasila. However, on the other hand, the move also raises debates regarding the limits of state intervention on freedom of religion and association (Setiawan & Taebenu, 2025). In this context, the state acts not only as a guardian of stability, but also as an actor that directly influences the structure and expression of religion in society.

In addition, the government also encourages religious moderation programs as a strategy to create an inclusive and tolerant religious life. The program is integrated into various sectors, including education, bureaucracy, and the social life of the community. Religious moderation is positioned as the main narrative in the country's religious policies, which aim to reduce extremism and strengthen social harmony. However, the implementation of this policy is also inseparable from criticism, especially related to the potential homogenization of religious practices and restrictions on certain religious expressions (Kurniawan & Afifi, 2023).

This finding aligns with Hamdani (2020) on religious moderation as a social stabilization strategy, yet diverges in that the present study demonstrates that such policies do not merely moderate religious expression, but also transform the religious identity of Islamic organizations through mechanisms of discursive negotiation. From an academic perspective, state policy towards

religion can be understood as a form of *governmentality* in the management of social life, where the state seeks to shape the behaviour and identity of citizens through regulations, institutions, and the production of certain discourses (Hefner, 2011). In the Indonesian context, this approach is seen in the state's efforts to steer religious practices towards a more moderate, controlled, and in line with the national stability agenda. State intervention takes place not only through the legal apparatus, but also through the normalization of certain values about "true religion" in the public sphere.

This finding is consistent with Menchik, (2017) concept of *godly nationalism*, which argues that religion occupies a central place in Indonesia's national identity and provides legitimacy for the state to regulate religious expression in the interest of social order. Within this framework, state intervention extends beyond administrative regulation to the production of normative boundaries that shape public religiosity. This dynamic is reflected in policies such as the dissolution of religious organizations and the promotion of religious moderation, which influence not only institutional structures but also the ways religious identities are expressed and negotiated in public life (Hidayah et al., 2024). Field findings support this argument, as Anwar Abbas noted that religious moderation has become a framework through which religion is expected to appear in the public sphere. However, this study extends Menchik's perspective by demonstrating that Islamic organizations are not merely objects of state regulation; rather, they act as active agents that selectively interpret, negotiate, and respond to state policies in accordance with their own religious traditions and institutional orientations.

These findings indicate that state policies operate not only as regulatory instruments but also as normative frameworks that influence how religion is expressed in public life. Through programs such as religious moderation, the state contributes to shaping acceptable forms of religiosity, while religious organizations actively negotiate, reinterpret, and adapt these frameworks according to their institutional traditions. Consequently, religious identity emerges from continuous interaction between state authority and religious agency rather than from doctrinal sources alone (Saeed, 2021).

Viewed through the lens of governmentality, these policies function as technologies of governance that shape the boundaries of legitimate religious expression. Rather than relying solely on coercive regulation, the state encourages religious actors to internalize particular norms associated with moderation, national commitment, and social harmony. In this sense, state power operates through the production of acceptable religious subjectivities, influencing how organizations define their public identities and religious missions.

These findings are in line with the study of Gusman et al., (2025) which shows that faith-based organizations have a strategic role in articulating and internalizing state policies into the social practices of society. However, more than just passive mediators, religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah also function as selective agents that interpret, adapt, and even criticize the policy before it is accepted by the public. Different from Gusman et al. (2025), who primarily view faith-based organizations as mediators of social policy, this study finds that Muhammadiyah performs a broader role as a *policy interpreter*, capable of supporting, negotiating, and simultaneously criticizing state policies. This finding suggests that religious organizations are not simply policy recipients but active actors that shape the meaning and implementation of state intervention within religious life. Therefore, the internalization of state policy does not occur linearly, but through a complex negotiation process involving the state, religious organizations, and society. In this context, state policies ultimately not only shape religious practices, but also transform the way societies define their religious identities in public life.

On the other hand, Ulil Abshar Abdallah from Nahdlatul Ulama emphasized that state policies are also understood as an effort to maintain social stability and prevent religion-based conflicts. He stated (interview, Ulil Ashar Abdallah Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama, 2025):

"We see the country's policy as part of an effort to maintain social order. In certain contexts, there needs to be a limit so that religion is not used for political purposes that undermine harmony."

The findings reveal different response patterns between Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama in responding to state policies. Muhammadiyah tends to evaluate state intervention through the framework of legal legitimacy, constitutional procedures, and public accountability. In contrast, Nahdlatul Ulama places greater emphasis on the social implications of policy and its contribution to maintaining communal stability and social harmony. This difference indicates that the transformation of religious identity does not occur uniformly, but is mediated by the distinct religious traditions and organizational characters of each institution. While Muhammadiyah demonstrates a more rational-policy orientation, Nahdlatul Ulama exhibits a socio-cultural orientation that prioritizes accommodation and conflict prevention. These findings reinforce the argument that religious organizations respond to state influence through different institutional logics shaped by their historical traditions and socio-religious roles.

The findings suggest that religion–state relations in Indonesia are better understood as a dynamic process of negotiation rather than a one-directional exercise of state power. Although the state possesses regulatory authority over religious life, Islamic organizations retain significant agency in interpreting, adapting, and at times contesting state intervention. Consequently, state policies during the Joko Widodo administration have influenced not only the institutional structure of religious life but also the transformation of religious identities in the public sphere. This study demonstrates that religious identity is shaped through reciprocal interactions between state authority and religious organizations, in which institutional traditions mediate how state influence is accepted, negotiated, and reproduced in socio-religious practices.

### **Religious Traditions of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama in Public Life**

Religious traditions in Indonesia cannot be understood solely as ritual practices, but as a living social value system and practice (*living religion*) and forming the collective identity of society (Rahman et al., 2024). In this context, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama represent the two main strands of Islamic religious traditions in Indonesia that have different characteristics, orientations, and strategies in interacting with public life. Both are not only religious institutions, but also social actors who actively shape religious practices, public discourse, and relations with the state.

Muhammadiyah represents a modernist Islamic tradition emphasizing *tajdid*, rationality, and adaptive interpretation of religious teachings. Its religious orientation is reflected in extensive engagement in education, health, and social services, shaping a progressive and socially oriented form of religiosity (Nurhayati et al., 2020). In contrast, Nahdlatul Ulama promotes a culturally rooted Islamic tradition that integrates local customs, ulama authority, and community-based rituals, enabling a flexible and socially embedded expression of religion (Fealy, 2012). As shown, religious practices based on local traditions have a significant contribution to building social cohesion and stability in rural communities.

This is reinforced by the statement of Ulil Absar Abdalla who affirmed (interview, Ulil Absar Abdalla, 2025):

"Religious traditions in Nahdlatul Ulama are not just rituals, but a way for the community to maintain social balance. Practices such as *tahlilan* or *yasinan* have a strong social function, not just individual worship."

This finding indicates that NU's religious traditions function not only as spiritual practices but also as mechanisms for maintaining social cohesion and communal solidarity (Amal & Saat, 2022). These different traditions produce distinct models of public religiosity, with Muhammadiyah emphasizing a normative-rational approach and NU adopting a cultural-communitarian orientation (Anardianto, 2022; Muaddab, 2018).

The findings of this study identify that the religious traditions of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama continue to adapt in the face of social dynamics and state policies as explained by Sudarnoto Abdul Hakim (interview, Sudarnoto Abdul Hakim, Central Board of Muhammadiyah, 2025):

"In Muhammadiyah, religious practices are not only about worship, but also how Islamic values are applied in social life, including education, health, and public policy."

This statement indicates that Muhammadiyah's religious tradition is strongly oriented toward social transformation, where religion is not only practiced ritually, but also implemented in various sectors of public life. This is in line with the findings of Imdad et al. (2025) who show that religious practices can have a broad social dimension, including ecological and economic aspects.

On the other hand, informants from Nahdlatul Ulama emphasized the importance of cultural approaches in religious practice (interview, Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama, 2025):

"Nahdlatul Ulama sees religion as part of people's lives. Traditions such as *tahlilan* or recitation are not only worship, but also a means of maintaining togetherness and social harmony."

This statement affirms that the religious tradition of Nahdlatul Ulama functions as a social mechanism that strengthens solidarity and community cohesion. In this perspective, religion is not only a belief system, but also a social instrument that contributes to stability and harmony. Rahman et al. (2025) show that the practice of religious rituals has an important symbolic function in building social communication and strengthening relationships between individuals in society. These traditions also shape distinctive forms of religious identity, which continue to evolve in response to social change and state policies (Kurniawan & Afifi, 2023).

Recent studies show that religious organizations have an important role in shaping society's response to social changes and state policies. Gusman et al., (2025) emphasized that faith-based organizations function as agents that bridge between religious values and social reality, and have the capacity to strengthen the social resilience of the community. In the Indonesian context, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama play this role through the religious traditions that they develop and implement in public life.

Thus, the religious traditions of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama are not only the identity of the organization, but also the foundation in shaping the religious practices of the community and relations with the state. The difference in orientation between the two shows that religious traditions in Indonesia are plural and dynamic, and have a strategic role in maintaining social harmony. In the context of state policy, this religious tradition is an important factor that influences how policies are received, negotiated, and implemented in people's lives.

### **Shifts in Muhammadiyah's Religious Traditions and Identity in State Influence**

In this setting, the state has the ability to influence a shift in Muhammadiyah's religious traditions and identity, particularly in how this organization frames religion in the public realm. If Muhammadiyah was previously known as a *tajdid* movement dedicated to the purification of teachings, education, health services, and social *dakwah*, contemporary developments show a stronger emphasis on issues of public policy, democracy, governance, and civil liberties. This move does not suggest a major doctrinal transformation, but rather an adaptation of Muhammadiyah's theological heritage to state dynamics and societal changes (Al-Hamdi, 2020).

The shift in Muhammadiyah's religious tradition and identity in the influence of the state can be seen in the way the organization responds to controversial policies, such as the dissolution of Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI). If in the previous period Muhammadiyah was better known through its *tajdid* orientation which focused on the purification of teachings and services of the people, then in the context of contemporary state policies, Muhammadiyah shows the strengthening of its identity as a religious actor who is actively involved in legal and civic issues (Munandar, 2024). Muhammadiyah did not immediately reject the policy, considering the consideration of national stability and threats to the state's ideology. However, on the other hand, Muhammadiyah also does not provide unconditional support, but emphasizes the importance of the *principle of rule of law*, transparency of the process, a clear legal basis, and guarantees of civil rights (Marfiando, 2020).

This method demonstrates the growth of Muhammadiyah's religious identity, which is no longer limited to rituals and social activities but has evolved into a public-based religious identity (public religiosity). In this perspective, state policies are regarded not merely as vehicles of power, but as legal goods that must comply with ethical and constitutional criteria (Burhani, 2018). This move

also demonstrates the adaptation of Muhammadiyah's religious heritage to sociopolitical changes, where the organization not only performs the duty of *dakwah*, but also plays a role as part of civil society that actively maintains state accountability (Saputra & Hayat, 2025). If previously Muhammadiyah was better known as a *dakwah* and education movement, then in today's context this organization is increasingly active in public policy discourse, including in issues related to democracy, civil liberties, and state governance. As expressed by (interview, Sudarnoto Abdul Hakim, Central Board of Muhammadiyah, 2025):

"Muhammadiyah does not reject state policies, but always emphasizes that everything must be done within the framework of law. Do not let in the name of stability, the principle of justice be ignored."

The statement shows that the influence of the state does not shift the ideological foundation of Muhammadiyah as a *tajdid* movement, but rather encourages the reinterpretation of religious traditions in a direction that is more responsive to public policy issues. In this context, Muhammadiyah's religious identity has been strengthened in the aspect of public rationality, where religion is positioned as a source of social ethics that is active in criticizing state policies (Achmad Zaky Nauval et al., 2024). However, the involvement in this agenda shows the adaptation of Muhammadiyah's religious tradition to the direction of state policy, without eliminating the principle of organizational independence. Muhammadiyah emphasizes that religious moderation should not be interpreted as standardizing religious practices or restricting the diversity of religious expressions (Shohib, 2025). The Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council has stated that:

"Moderation is important, but it should not be a tool to standardize religion. Islam has diversity, and it must be maintained, not restricted."

This statement shows that Muhammadiyah views state policies critically, especially if it has the potential to reduce plurality in religious practices. In this context, Muhammadiyah not only responds to state policies, but also seeks to influence policy direction through advocacy and constructive dialogue. This can be seen in the role of the Institute for Wisdom and Public Policy (LHKP) which actively provides input on government policies, both through academic studies and official statements of the organization.

Overall, Muhammadiyah's response to state policies reflects a transformation from a primarily reformist movement into a policy-oriented religious actor. While maintaining its commitment to *tajdid*, Muhammadiyah increasingly engages with issues of governance, civil liberties, and public accountability, thereby reinforcing a form of public religiosity that combines religious commitment with civic responsibility (Al-Hamdi, 2022).

Drawing on coercive isomorphism, Muhammadiyah's growing engagement with governance, constitutionalism and public accountability can be understood as an adaptive response to a policy milieu privileging moderate, nationally oriented forms of religious participation. Yet the organisation's enduring modernist and reformist orientation indicates that adaptation is selective rather than constitutive of complete organisational homogenisation. The findings suggest that state influence operates through institutional pressures that induce behavioural and structural adjustments while allowing core doctrinal and organisational distinctiveness to persist. This nuanced dynamic highlights the coexistence of conformity and continuity within religious organisations negotiating contemporary regulatory and discursive expectations.

The state's influence has fostered a gradual reshaping of Muhammadiyah's religious traditions and identity, characterised not by abrupt ideological rupture but by a reinforced orientation towards rationality, policy engagement and responsiveness to public concerns. This trajectory accentuates *tajdid* as the movement's enduring principle while prompting its reinterpretation in relation to state institutions and social change. Consequently, Muhammadiyah adapts its reformist ethos to contemporary policy discourses, articulating normative positions through evidence-informed, pragmatic frameworks without abandoning core doctrinal commitments. The result is a dynamic, state-engaged modernism that balances continuity of tradition with strategic institutional responsiveness.

## **The Adaptation of Tradition and the Shift in the Religious Identity of Nahdlatul Ulama**

In the context of religion and state relations, the influence of the state also encourages the adaptation of traditions and the shift in the religious identity of Nahdlatul Ulama, especially in the way this organization positions Islamic traditions based on Islamic boarding schools and local culture in the public sphere. If in the previous period Nahdlatul Ulama was better known as an organization oriented towards the preservation of local religious traditions through a network of Islamic boarding schools, communitarian rituals, and ulama authorities, then in contemporary developments there is a strengthening of orientation to the role of socio-religious mediator who actively bridges the relationship between the state and society. This shift does not indicate a fundamental ideological change, but rather a form of gradual adaptation to the dynamics of state policies and social change (Imanita et al., 2025).

In the context of the Joko Widodo administration, the adaptation of the religious tradition of Nahdlatul Ulama can be seen through the tendency of this organization to build closer relations with the state as a strategy to maintain social welfare. The involvement of Nahdlatul Ulama figures in the government structure shows a more intense relationship between religious organizations and power. This closeness is not merely interpreted as political co-optation, but as an effort to ensure that moderate, tolerant, and tradition-based Islamic values can be accommodated in state policies (interview, Ulil Abshar Abdallah Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama, 2025):

"We see the state as part of an effort to maintain benefits. If the state takes policies to maintain stability, Nahdlatul Ulama tends to support it as long as it does not conflict with the basic values of Islam."

This adaptation can be seen in the strengthening involvement of Nahdlatul Ulama in state policy agendas, such as religious moderation, deradicalization, strengthening social harmony, and moderate Islamic diplomacy in the public sphere. In this context, Nahdlatul Ulama does not abandon the tradition of pesantren or community-based religious practices, but reinterprets these traditions so that they remain relevant to the needs of the community and the direction of state policies. Thus, the influence of the state encourages the transformation of the religious identity of Nahdlatul Ulama from a cultural community-based organization to a religious actor that increasingly plays a role in social stability and national religious governance (Hidayatullah et al., 2022).

In the case of the dissolution of HTI and FPI, it can be seen that there is a strengthening of the religious identity of Nahdlatul Ulama which increasingly places social stability and national harmony as part of the expression of religion. If previously NU's religious practices were more dominant based on local communities and pesantren authorities, then in the context of contemporary state policies, NU increasingly shows itself as a guardian of social moderation and mediator of religious conflicts (interview, Suedy, Nahdlatul Ulama, 2025).

"We cannot see state policies only from one side. Sometimes there is a need for decisive action to maintain unity. Nahdlatul Ulama here sees more of its long-term impact on society."

This approach shows that Nahdlatul Ulama focuses more on the social impact of policies than on procedural or normative aspects. In this context, Nahdlatul Ulama plays a role as a guardian of social harmony that seeks to minimize conflicts and maintain balance in society. This is in line with the findings of Rahman et al. (2025) who show that community-based religious practices have an important function in building social cohesion and preventing conflict (Muhammad Iqbal, 2019).

Nonetheless, Nahdlatul Ulama continues to play a vital role in shaping people's religious practices, particularly through a deeply rooted cultural perspective. Nahdlatul Ulama's community-based religious heritage enables this organization to serve as a bridge between state and community policies, transforming such policies into community-acceptable social behaviours. In this situation, Nahdlatul Ulama is not simply a beneficiary of policies, but also an actor, adapting and internalising policies in a local context (Saadah, 2023).

Nahdlatul Ulama's response to state policies also contributes to the formation of a cultural and inclusive religious identity. This identity emphasizes the importance of social harmony, tolerance, and adaptation to change. In this context, Nahdlatul Ulama not only maintains religious traditions, but also transforms them to remain relevant to the social dynamics and policies of the state (Ramdhan, 2019).

Viewed through the lens of coercive isomorphism, Nahdlatul Ulama's increasing involvement in state agendas related to religious moderation, social harmony, and national integration reflects an adaptive response to institutional pressures emanating from the contemporary Indonesian state. However, this adaptation does not signify the abandonment of NU's traditionalist foundations. Rather, state-defined norms are reinterpreted through pesantren traditions, local religious practices, and community-based networks. Consequently, adaptation occurs through selective accommodation rather than complete conformity to state expectations.

Based on the above analysis, the influence of the state has encouraged the adaptation of traditions and the gradual shift in the religious identity of Nahdlatul Ulama. This shift does not eliminate the traditional and pesantren-based character that is the foundation of the organization, but strengthens the orientation of Nahdlatul Ulama as a socio-religious mediator that is adaptive to state policies, especially in maintaining social stability, religious moderation, and community harmony.

### **The Transformation of Religious Identity and Its Impact on Public Life**

The transformation of religious identity is a logical consequence of the dynamic interaction between religious traditions and state policies. In the context of contemporary Indonesia, especially in the era of the Joko Widodo administration, state policies not only function as regulatory instruments, but also as factors that actively shape the direction of the development of religious identity in public life. This process does not take place in a linear manner, but rather through a negotiation mechanism that involves religious organizations as the main actors in bridging the relationship between the state and society (Athallah et al., 2024).

In the context of Muhammadiyah, the transformation of religious identity can be seen in strengthening the role of a "*policy-oriented religious actor*". This identity emphasizes not only aspects of individual religiosity, but also social responsibility and involvement in public issues. An informant from Muhammadiyah explained (interview, Anwar Abbas, Muhammadiyah Central Executive, 2025):

"Now Muhammadiyah citizens are not only invited to obey in worship, but also to be critical of public policies. There is an awareness that religion must be present in social life."

This statement shows that state policies indirectly encourage Muhammadiyah to strengthen its role in the public sphere, not only as a religious organization, but also as an active social actor in policy discourse. This transformation reflects a shift from normative religious identities to identities that are more contextual and responsive to social dynamics.

On the other hand, in Nahdlatul Ulama, the transformation of religious identity is more visible in strengthening the role of "*cultural mediator*". This identity emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between religious traditions and social stability, as well as the ability to adapt to state policies without losing its cultural roots (Akmaliah, 2022). An informant from Nahdlatul Ulama stated (interview, Ulil Absar Abdallah, Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama, 2025):

"Nahdlatul Ulama still maintains traditions, but also adjusts to conditions. If the state has a policy, we try to understand and adjust it so as not to cause conflicts in society."

This statement suggests that the transformation of religious identity within Nahdlatul Ulama occurs gradually rather than through radical change, but through gradual and contextual adaptation. In this process, Nahdlatul Ulama acts as a bridge between state policies and the religious practices of the community with the aim of maintaining social harmony. This role has an impact not only on the organization, but also on the religious practices of the community in public life, which is reflected in the way the community understands and practices religion and responds

to state policies (Bush, 2009). For example, the strengthening of the narrative of religious moderation encourages the emergence of more inclusive and tolerant religious practices, but also raises debates about the limits of state intervention in religious life.

The findings reveal that Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama respond differently to state policies, resulting in distinct patterns of religious identity transformation. Muhammadiyah tends to adopt a legal-rational and policy-oriented approach that emphasizes public accountability, critical engagement, and civic responsibility, whereas Nahdlatul Ulama promotes a socio-cultural and accommodative orientation focused on social harmony and communal stability. These differences suggest that state policies operate as a common institutional pressure shaping religious identity, yet their effects are mediated by each organization's historical traditions and institutional character. Consequently, state influence generates selective and differentiated forms of adaptation rather than uniform outcomes, highlighting the continuing importance of organizational agency in negotiating religious identity in contemporary Indonesia.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that religion–state relations in Indonesia operate through a dynamic process of negotiation, adaptation, and reinterpretation in which religious organizations function as active mediating actors. The findings show that state policies during the Joko Widodo administration act not only as regulatory instruments but also as normative and discursive forces shaping religious practices and identities in public life. While Muhammadiyah responds through a legal-rational and policy-oriented approach emphasizing public accountability and civic engagement, Nahdlatul Ulama adopts a socio-cultural and accommodative orientation focused on social harmony and communal stability. These differences indicate that religious identity transformation is shaped by the historical traditions and organizational characteristics of each institution rather than occurring uniformly.

Theoretically, this study extends the literature on religion–state relations by showing that religious identity is constructed through continuous interaction between state authority, organizational agency, and socio-religious traditions. Drawing on the concepts of governmentality and coercive isomorphism, the findings suggest that state policies define normative frameworks of acceptable religiosity, while Islamic organizations actively negotiate, reinterpret, and selectively adapt those norms. Consequently, coercive isomorphism operates not through organizational homogenization, but through differentiated forms of adaptation that preserve distinctive organizational identities.

This study has several limitations. The research was conducted at the central organizational level and involved a limited number of elite informants, which may not fully capture grassroots religious practices at local and regional levels. In addition, the analysis focuses on state policies during the Jokowi administration, limiting broader historical comparison. Future research should examine the long-term effects of state intervention on local religious communities and compare organizational responses across different socio-political contexts in Indonesia and Southeast Asia.

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