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Strategic Ambiguity in Governing Religious Deviance: Policy Inconsistency, Social Stability, and Human Rights in Indonesia

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Abstract: Indonesia has an extensive regulatory framework for governing religious life, yet allegations of religious deviance continue to expose a tension between state regulation, social stability, and the constitutional protection of freedom of religion or belief. This article examines Indonesia from 2000 to 2020 and shows that, despite having legal and administrative tools, the government's inconsistent application of them functions as a deliberate form of strategic ambiguity. Using a qualitative design, the study combines document analysis of key regulations and policy instruments with comparative case analysis of seven selected cases of groups labelled *aliran sesat* (lit. "deviant streams") between 2000 and 2020. The data, including fatwas issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), government regulations, human rights reports, media chronologies, and scholarly literature, are analysed through thematic coding informed by Dunn's policy framework and Blumer's symbolic interactionism. The analysis identifies four recurring policy patterns: (1) selective law enforcement based on perceived social impact; (2) reactive rather than proactive government response; (3) selective adoption of MUI recommendations or fatwas; and (4) asymmetrical protection of rights. These patterns generate legal uncertainty and unequal protection, disproportionately affecting minority groups whose freedom of religion or belief is constitutionally guaranteed. The article argues that policy ambiguity is not merely an implementation failure, but a strategic governance pattern produced by competing imperatives of public order, majoritarian religious authority, and rights commitments. It recommends clearer procedural thresholds, rights-based early response mechanisms, and transparent institutional accountability in handling allegations of religious deviance, offering insights for the broader study of religion, society, and minority rights in plural contexts such as Indonesia.

Keywords: Heretical Sect; Government Policy; Social Stability; Human Rights

Abstract: Indonesia memiliki kerangka regulasi yang luas untuk mengatur kehidupan beragama, namun tuduhan penyimpangan agama terus mengungkap adanya ketegangan antara regulasi negara, stabilitas sosial, dan perlindungan konstitusional terhadap kebebasan beragama atau berkeyakinan. Artikel ini mengkaji Indonesia dari tahun 2000 hingga 2020 dan menunjukkan bahwa, meskipun memiliki instrumen hukum dan administratif, penerapan yang tidak konsisten oleh pemerintah terhadap instrumen-instrumen tersebut berfungsi sebagai bentuk ambiguitas strategis yang disengaja. Dengan menggunakan desain kualitatif, penelitian ini menggabungkan analisis dokumen terhadap peraturan dan instrumen kebijakan utama dengan analisis kasus komparatif terhadap tujuh kasus terpilih mengenai kelompok-kelompok yang dicap sebagai "aliran sesat" antara tahun 2000 dan 2020. Data, termasuk fatwa yang dikeluarkan oleh Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), peraturan pemerintah, laporan hak asasi manusia, kronologi media, dan literatur akademis, dianalisis melalui pengkodean tematik yang didasarkan pada kerangka kebijakan Dunn dan interaksionisme simbolik Blumer. Analisis ini mengidentifikasi empat pola kebijakan yang berulang: (1) penegakan hukum selektif berdasarkan dampak sosial yang dirasakan; (2) respons pemerintah

yang reaktif alih-alih proaktif; (3) penerapan selektif terhadap rekomendasi atau fatwa MUI; dan (4) perlindungan hak yang asimetris. Pola-pola ini menimbulkan ketidakpastian hukum dan perlindungan yang tidak setara, yang secara tidak proporsional memengaruhi kelompok minoritas yang kebebasan beragama atau berkeyakinannya dijamin oleh konstitusi. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa ambiguitas kebijakan bukan sekadar kegagalan implementasi, melainkan pola tata kelola strategis yang dihasilkan oleh tuntutan yang saling bertentangan antara ketertiban umum, otoritas agama mayoritas, dan komitmen terhadap hak-hak. Artikel ini merekomendasikan ambang batas prosedural yang lebih jelas, mekanisme respons dini berbasis hak, serta akuntabilitas kelembagaan yang transparan dalam menangani tuduhan penyimpangan agama, yang memberikan wawasan bagi studi yang lebih luas mengenai agama, masyarakat, dan hak-hak minoritas dalam konteks plural seperti di Indonesia.

Kata kunci: Aliran Sesat; Kebijakan Pemerintah; Stabilitas Sosial; Hak Asasi Manusia

1. Introduction

Regulation of minority religious groups has become a recurring challenge in plural societies, where governments are expected to protect freedom of religion or belief while preventing social conflict. In Indonesia, this challenge is particularly acute because the state constitutionally recognises religious freedom, yet public policy often prioritises harmony, order, and the protection of state-recognised religions (Ramstedt, 2019; Ropi, 2016). The problem remains empirically significant. SETARA Institute reported 260 incidents and 402 acts of violations of freedom of religion or belief in 2024, an increase from 217 incidents and 329 acts in 2023 (SETARA Institute, 2025). International monitoring reports similarly note that religious freedom in Indonesia continues to be shaped by legal restrictions, social pressure, and local-level discrimination (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2024; United States Department of State, 2024). These figures show that the governance of religious diversity remains unstable, especially for groups labelled *aliran sesat* (heresy, lit. "deviant streams"), a term used in this article to refer to groups accused of religious deviance rather than to affirm the truth of such allegations (Irawan & Adnan, 2021).

Existing legal studies have examined how Indonesia's regulatory framework shapes state responses to alleged religious deviance. Prior research has focused on Law No. 1/PNPS/1965 on the Prevention of Religious Abuse and/or Blasphemy, the 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree on Ahmadiyya, and the 2006 Joint Regulation on religious harmony and houses of worship. These studies show that legal instruments provide the state with broad authority to restrict teachings considered deviant or disturbing public order (Ropi, 2017; Tyson, 2021). Recent policy reports also highlight that Indonesia's legal framework continues to create obstacles for freedom of religion or belief, particularly through blasphemy-related provisions and administrative regulations affecting minority communities (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2024). However, this literature remains limited because it has not fully explained why the same instruments generate different responses across cases, regions, and political contexts. Although previous studies have examined legal restrictions, religious freedom, and the authority of Islamic institutions in Indonesia, they have not yet systematically connected legal ambiguity, local discretion, and the social construction of deviance within a single comparative framework (Marshall, 2018; Menchik, 2022). The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), Indonesia's foremost national religious authority, plays a central but uneven role in this governance landscape, as will be shown in the cases that follow.

A second body of literature examines implementation, intolerance, and human rights consequences. Studies on Ahmadiyya, Gafatar, local belief communities, and blasphemy-related cases show that minority groups often face stigma, administrative exclusion, violence, or forced relocation, while state institutions frequently respond after public pressure has escalated (Butt, 2020). Human rights monitoring further indicates that discriminatory regulations and local restrictions continue to affect religious minorities, including in matters of worship, identity, and community recognition

(Harsono, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024; United States Department of State, 2024). Yet these studies often treat inconsistency as weak enforcement, political compromise, or local failure. The explicit gap addressed in this article is the lack of an integrated explanation connecting policy ambiguity, local discretion, and the social construction of "deviance" as mutually reinforcing mechanisms in Indonesia's religious governance.

To address this gap, this article integrates Dunn's policy implementation framework and Blumer's symbolic interactionism. The integration is built on two analytical levels. Dunn's framework explains how policy ambiguity, institutional fragmentation, and discretionary implementation shape state responses, while Blumer's symbolic interactionism explains how the meaning of "deviance" is socially constructed before it becomes an object of policy intervention. Dunn's framework is used to examine how unclear policy objectives, fragmented institutional mandates, implementation gaps, and discretionary policy instruments produce uneven governance outcomes (Dunn, 2015). In this article, policy ambiguity refers to a situation in which policy objectives, implementation standards, and institutional responsibilities are open to competing interpretations. This concept is relevant to the Indonesian context because the governance of alleged religious deviance is shaped by overlapping commitments to public order, religious harmony, majoritarian religious expectations, and constitutional protection of freedom of religion or belief.

Blumer's symbolic interactionism explains how meanings are produced through interaction and how social labels shape action (Blumer, 1986). From this perspective, the label *aliran sesat*, or "deviant" more broadly, is not treated as a neutral or fixed legal category but as a socially constructed meaning produced through interaction among religious authorities, state officials, community actors, media narratives, and affected groups. Labelling becomes important because it transforms religious difference into a perceived public problem, making restriction, monitoring, or intervention appear socially legitimate.

Combining these perspectives allows the article to analyse both how a group becomes defined as a public problem and how that definition is translated into state intervention through legal, administrative, or informal policy instruments (Menchik, 2022; Picard, Durocher, & Gendron, 2019; Tampubolon, 2025). Specifically, Dunn's framework operates at the levels of policy design, institutional discretion, implementation, and instrument choice, while Blumer's perspective operates at the levels of meaning-making, labeling, public framing, and symbolic authority. Together, they explain how accusations of *aliran sesat* move from social interpretation into policy action, and why similar accusations may generate different governmental responses across cases and localities.

The article argues that Indonesia's inconsistent handling of groups accused of religious deviance is best understood as strategic ambiguity. It means that ambiguity is not merely an accidental weakness of implementation, but a governance pattern that allows state actors to balance competing pressures between public order, majoritarian religious expectations, and constitutional rights. The expected patterns are reactive enforcement after public unrest, selective adoption of religious authority recommendations, varied use of policy instruments, and asymmetrical protection between majority claims and minority rights.

Building on this argument, this study aims to explain why Indonesian government responses to groups accused of *aliran sesat* remain inconsistent despite the availability of legal and administrative instruments, and to analyse the implications of this inconsistency for legal certainty, social stability, and the protection of freedom of religion or belief. To achieve this aim, the study addresses three research questions. First, what are the main patterns of policy inconsistency in the governance of groups accused of religious deviance in Indonesia? Second, what institutional, political, and symbolic factors drive selective enforcement across cases and localities? Third, what are the implications of these inconsistent responses for the protection of freedom of religion or belief and for social stability?

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative, document-based comparative case study design (Goodrick, 2020). It analyses seven documented case clusters from 2000 to 2020, including Ahmadiyya, Gafatar, Lia Eden, and selected provincial cases from North Sulawesi and North Sumatra involving MUI fatwas or decisions on alleged deviance. Cases were selected using purposive

sampling based on the following criteria: the case involved public or institutional allegations of *aliran sesat* or religious deviance; it involved legal, administrative, or religious authority responses; it showed variation in public pressure, policy instruments, and rights-related consequences; it was supported by accessible documents such as regulations, MUI fatwas, official statements, monitoring reports, media chronologies, or scholarly literature; and it represented both nationally visible controversies and provincial-level responses. These cases were selected because they represent variation in public pressure, types of accusations, involvement of religious authorities, state responses, and majority-minority demographic contexts. The data consist of regulations, joint decrees, MUI fatwas, government statements, human rights reports, media-based chronologies, and relevant scholarly literature. The documents were coded thematically using categories derived from Dunn and Blumer, including policy ambiguity, institutional fragmentation, instrument choice, labelling, threat construction, and symbolic authority. Cross-case comparison was conducted by tracing the sequence from accusation, public labelling, institutional response, policy instrument selection, and rights-related consequences (Borman, Clarke, Cotner, & Lee, 2012). Validity was strengthened through triangulation across legal, institutional, monitoring, and scholarly sources, and by checking each case chronology against more than one source (Campbell, Goodman-Williams, Feeney, & Fehler-Cabral, 2020).

2. Mapping cases of alleged religious deviance in Indonesia (2000–2020)

The following subsections present four patterns derived from the cross-case analysis. Patterns 1 through 4 (Sections 2.2–2.5) collectively answer RQ1 by identifying the main forms of policy inconsistency in Indonesia's governance of groups accused of religious deviance. The institutional, political, and symbolic mechanisms driving these patterns (RQ2) are interpreted and explained in Discussion Section 3.1. The implications of these patterns for the protection of freedom of religion or belief, social stability, and policy reform (RQ3) are addressed in Discussion Section 3.3

2.1. Overview of Analysed Cases

This study analyses seven selected cases of groups accused of religious deviance in Indonesia between 2000 and 2020. The cases were selected because they represent variation in geographical location, type of religious group, level of public pressure, involvement of religious authority, and form of government response. The seven cases consist of three nationally visible controversies, namely Ahmadiyya, Gafatar, and Lia Eden, and four provincial cases involving local MUI fatwas or decisions, namely Nurul Insan Haq and Tasawuf Laduna Ilma Nurul Insan/LINI in North Sulawesi, and Soul Training and Ajaran Tilawah in North Sumatra. This case selection allows the study to compare how similar accusations of religious deviance generate different patterns of policy response across national and provincial contexts.

The analysed cases show that allegations of religious deviance do not produce a uniform governmental response. In high-salience cases such as Ahmadiyya and Gafatar, the accusations were accompanied by strong public pressure, national-level attention, and restrictive state intervention. In the Lia Eden case, the response took the form of criminal prosecution against spiritual claims considered deviant or blasphemous. By contrast, the North Sulawesi cases show a more cautious pattern, in which provincial MUI processes emphasised clarification, guidance, monitoring, and the prevention of anarchic public responses. The North Sumatra cases show a stronger connection between doctrinal judgement and social-order concerns, particularly where alleged deviance was associated with rejection of orthodox teachings or exclusive group practices.

Table 1 presents the seven cases analysed in this study. The table summarises the year, location, group type, main accusation, level of public pressure, government response, MUI involvement, and rights-related implications. This overview provides the empirical basis for identifying four patterns discussed in the following subsections: selective law enforcement based on social impact, reactive rather than proactive government responses; selective adoption of MUI recommendations or fatwas, and asymmetrical protection of rights.

Table 1. Overview of the Seven Analysed Cases

Case	Group/Case	Year	Location	Group Type	Main Accusation	Public Pressure	Govt Response	MUI Involvement	Rights Implication
1	Ahmadiyya	2008 – 2011	National, W. Java, Banten, NTB	Islamic minority movement	Deviation from Islamic orthodoxy	High	Joint Ministerial Decree, local restrictions, security response	Strong national MUI influence	Violence, displacement, restriction of worship
2	Gafatar	2016	West Kalimantan & national	Syncretic/new religious movement	Religious deviation & public order disturbance	High	Prohibition, relocation, return programme, rehabilitation	Strong MUI involvement	Forced relocation, stigma, loss of community autonomy
3	Lia Eden	2000s	Jakarta	Spiritual movement	Claim of revelation & spiritual authority	Medium	Criminal prosecution, restriction of activities	Medium influence	Criminalisation of belief
4	Nurul Insan Haq	2015	North Sulawesi	Local Islamic teaching group	Doctrinal deviation	Low-medium	Monitoring, guidance, restriction recommendation	Prov. MUI Fatwa No. 01/2015	Administrative restriction, social stigma
5	LINI	2019	North Sulawesi	Sufi-oriented local group	Doctrinal deviation, controversial teaching	Low-medium	Monitoring, guidance, restriction, warning vs. anarchic action	Prov. MUI Fatwa No. 02/2019	Preventive control, restriction, stigma

Case	Group/Case	Year	Location	Group Type	Main Accusation	Public Pressure	Govt Response	MUI Involvement	Rights Implication
6	Soul Training	2006	Deli Serdang, North Sumatra	Islamic teaching group	Rejection of Sunnah / deviation	Medium	Religious authority decision, local institutional response	Prov. MUI Decision No. 01/KPTS/MUI/VI/2006	Social exclusion, restriction
7	Ajaran Tilawah	2007	Medan, North Sumatra	Islamic teaching group	Doctrinal deviation & social-order concern	Medium-high	Religious authority decision, administrative attention	Prov. MUI Decision No. 300/DP.01-11/X/2007	Stigma, restriction, public suspicion

Source: Analysis Documents, 2025

The overview in Table 1 indicates that the seven cases can be divided into two broad categories. The first category consists of nationally visible cases (Ahmadiyya, Gafatar, Lia Eden), which attracted wider public attention and generated stronger forms of state intervention. The second category consists of provincial cases (Nurul Insan Haq, LINI, Soul Training, Ajaran Tilawah), handled more locally through provincial MUI fatwas or decisions, monitoring, guidance, and administrative attention. This distinction shows that the level of public visibility strongly influenced the intensity of policy response.

Table 1 also shows that government responses varied even when the accusations were broadly similar. Most cases involved allegations of doctrinal deviation, but the policy instruments used were not uniform. This variation suggests that policy enforcement was shaped not only by legal or theological considerations, but also by local social context, public pressure, and perceived risk to social stability. The table further reveals an asymmetry in rights protection: in several cases, accused groups experienced restrictions, stigma, displacement, criminalisation, or administrative monitoring, while the concerns of majority communities were more readily translated into public-order considerations. Therefore, the seven cases demonstrate that inconsistency is not incidental, but part of a broader governance pattern in which accusations of religious deviance are managed differently depending on social pressure, institutional context, and the symbolic authority of religious bodies.

2.2. Pattern 1: Selective Law Enforcement Based on Social Impact

The first pattern identified in the seven cases is selective law enforcement based on the perceived social impact of the accused group. The data show that government response became stronger when allegations of religious deviance were accompanied by wider public pressure, mass mobilisation, media attention, or claims of social disturbance. Of the seven cases analysed, Ahmadiyya (Case #1) and Gafatar (Case #2) involved high public pressure and resulted in strong restrictive state responses. Three cases (Lia Eden, Soul Training, Ajaran Tilawah) involved medium or medium-high public concern and resulted in prosecution, religious authority decisions, or administrative attention. Meanwhile, two cases (Nurul Insan Haq and LINI) involved lower public visibility and were handled through clarification, guidance, monitoring, and limited restriction. This pattern indicates that the state did not apply legal instruments uniformly across cases. Instead, the intensity of enforcement was closely related to the perceived scale of social risk.

Case #1 on Ahmadiyya illustrates the strongest form of selective enforcement. Although doctrinal controversy over Ahmadiyya had existed for decades, restrictive state intervention became more visible when public pressure, religious mobilisation, and local conflict intensified. The 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree restricted the dissemination of Ahmadiyya's teachings and was later followed by various local restrictions and episodes of violence. It shows that enforcement was shaped not only by theological disagreement, but also by the state's attempt to respond to social unrest and demands from majority groups.

A similar pattern appears in Case #2 on Gafatar. The government response became decisive after the group was publicly framed as a source of religious deviation and social disturbance, resulting in prohibition, relocation, return programmes, and rehabilitation. In contrast, Cases #4 and #5 in North Sulawesi were managed through clarification, provincial MUI fatwas, monitoring, guidance, and recommendations to prevent further dissemination because they did not generate the same level of national controversy.

The comparison across cases suggests that social impact functioned as an informal threshold for state intervention. Where public pressure was limited, the response tended to be softer, more localised, and more preventive. It demonstrates a central feature of policy ambiguity: the same broad legal and religious categories can produce different enforcement outcomes depending on the social and political context in which the accusation emerges.

Table 2. Selective Law Enforcement Based on Social Impact

Level of Social Impact	No. of Cases	Dominant Policy Response	Example Cases	Observed Pattern
High public pressure	2 of 7	Restriction, prohibition, relocation, rehabilitation, or security response	Case #1 Ahmadiyya; Case #2 Gafatar	Strong intervention when accusations linked to public unrest and national attention
Medium or medium-high	3 of 7	Criminal prosecution, religious authority decision, or administrative attention	Case #3 Lia Eden; Case #6 Soul Training; Case #7 Ajaran Tilawah	State or religious authority response emerged when doctrinal controversy became publicly visible
Low-medium public pressure	2 of 7	Clarification, guidance, monitoring, and limited restriction	Case #4 Nurul Insan Haq; Case #5 LINI	Softer response when controversy remained local and did not escalate nationally

The evidence in Table 2 confirms that law enforcement was not primarily determined by the existence of deviance allegations alone. Rather, the decisive factor was whether the allegation was socially amplified and perceived as threatening public order. It explains why Ahmadiyya and Gafatar received stronger state responses than Nurul Insan Haq and LINI, even though all were placed under the broad category of alleged religious deviance. Selective enforcement is one of the main expressions of strategic ambiguity in Indonesia's governance of religious diversity.

2.3. Pattern 2: Government Response Is Reactive, Not Proactive

The second pattern is that government responses were predominantly reactive rather than proactive. Five of the seven cases (Ahmadiyya, Gafatar, Lia Eden, Soul Training, Ajaran Tilawah) show a reactive or reactive-local pattern: formal intervention occurred after the accusation of deviance had become publicly visible through controversy, pressure from religious organisations, media attention, or social unrest. Only two cases (Nurul Insan Haq and LINI) show a more semi-preventive pattern, because provincial MUI processes involved clarification, investigation, guidance, and warning against anarchic public responses before the controversy escalated widely.

Case #1 on Ahmadiyya shows that state response intensified after the issue became a national controversy involving public mobilisation, religious pressure, and local conflict. The 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree was issued after long-standing contestation and increasing demands from majority groups. Case #2 on Gafatar similarly demonstrates a reactive response: government action became decisive after the group was framed as a threat to public order. In Case #3, Lia Eden's spiritual claims became a public controversy before being handled through criminal prosecution. These cases indicate that the state often responded after social pressure had already transformed religious difference into a public-order issue.

The provincial cases provide a more nuanced picture. Cases #4 and #5 in North Sulawesi suggest a semi-preventive model because the provincial MUI conducted clarification and issued recommendations that included monitoring and guidance — also warning the public against anarchic reaction. Cases #6 and #7 in North Sumatra were more reactive-local, because doctrinal concerns were connected to broader social-order narratives. It shows that proactive mechanisms existed in some local settings, but they were not institutionalised as a consistent national approach.

Table 3. Timeline Pattern of Government Response

Case	Group	Public Pressure Indicator	Religious Authority Response	Government Action	Response Type
1	Ahmadiyya	Public mobilisation, religious pressure, local conflict, national controversy	Strong MUI influence and condemnation	Joint Ministerial Decree, local restrictions, security response	Reactive
2	Gafatar	Public anxiety, social controversy, framing as public-order threat	Strong MUI involvement	Prohibition, relocation, return programme, rehabilitation	Reactive
3	Lia Eden	Public controversy over revelation and spiritual claims	Medium religious authority influence	Criminal prosecution, restriction of activities	Reactive
4	Nurul Insan Haq	Limited local concern, request for clarification	Prov. MUI Fatwa No. 01/2015	Monitoring, guidance, restriction recommendation	Semi-preventive
5	LINI	Limited local concern over doctrinal teaching	Prov. MUI Fatwa No. 02/2019 & warning vs. anarchic response	Monitoring, guidance, restriction recommendation	Semi-preventive
6	Soul Training	Local doctrinal concern, religious authority attention	Prov. MUI Decision No. 01/KPTS/MUI/VI/2006	Local institutional response, social exclusion	Reactive-local
7	Ajaran Tilawah	Doctrinal concern, perceived social-order risk	Prov. MUI Decision No. 300/DP.01-11/X/2007	Administrative attention and restriction	Reactive-local

Table 3 shows that public pressure functioned as a major trigger of government response. In high-salience cases, the government acted after public controversy had already escalated. In the provincial cases, the response varied according to local institutional capacity and demographic context. The semi-preventive pattern in North Sulawesi suggests that clarification and guidance can reduce the risk of escalation, but this mechanism was not uniformly applied. Therefore, the reactive character of government response represents another expression of policy ambiguity: the state has

legal instruments, but their use depends heavily on when and how a case becomes socially and politically urgent.

2.4. Pattern 3: Selective Adoption of MUI Recommendations/Fatwas

The third pattern concerns the selective adoption of MUI recommendations and fatwas. Of the seven cases, two (Ahmadiyya and Gafatar) show strong adoption of MUI-related religious authority into state restriction. Four cases (Nurul Insan Haq, LINI, Soul Training, Ajaran Tilawah) show partial adoption, where provincial MUI fatwas or decisions influenced monitoring, guidance, administrative attention, or restriction, but did not always produce the same level of coercive state action. One case, Lia Eden, shows a more indirect pattern, where religious authority shaped the public meaning of deviance but the state response was primarily expressed through criminal prosecution.

Case #1 on Ahmadiyya demonstrates strong adoption: MUI's long-standing theological condemnation helped shape the national framing of Ahmadiyya as deviant, contributing to the political environment in which the 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree became possible. Case #2 on Gafatar also shows strong adoption, as religious authority played an important role in framing the group as deviant and socially dangerous, followed by prohibition, relocation, and rehabilitation. The provincial cases show a different pattern. In North Sulawesi, MUI fatwas may function not only as doctrinal judgement but also as instruments of local stabilisation. In North Sumatra (Cases #6 and #7), provincial MUI decisions were more closely linked to doctrinal orthodoxy and social-order concerns.

Table 4. Selective Adoption of MUI Recommendations/Fatwas

Adoption Type	No. of Cases	Characteristics	Example Cases	Observed Pattern
Strong adoption	2 of 7	MUI influence or recommendation closely followed by restrictive state action	Case #1 Ahmadiyya; Case #2 Gafatar	Fatwa becomes a legitimating reference for state restriction
Partial adoption	4 of 7	MUI fatwa informs monitoring, guidance, administrative attention, or limited restriction	Case #4, #5, #6, #7	Fatwa shapes local response but does not always produce uniform coercive action
Indirect adoption	1 of 7	Religious authority shapes public meaning of deviance; state uses legal prosecution	Case #3 Lia Eden	Religious labelling contributes to public legitimacy of legal action

The pattern in Table 4 confirms that MUI's authority operates symbolically and institutionally, but unevenly. In nationally visible cases, its recommendations can reinforce restrictive policy. In local cases (especially North Sulawesi), fatwas may also function as tools of clarification and stabilisation. This variation supports the broader argument that policy ambiguity is produced not only by unclear state regulation, but also by the selective translation of religious authority into governmental action.

2.5. Pattern 4: Asymmetrical Protection of Rights

The fourth pattern is asymmetrical protection of rights. Across the seven cases, the concerns of majority communities were often treated as public-order issues, while accused minority groups were frequently positioned as sources of disorder. At least six of the seven cases show rights-related consequences for the accused groups, including restriction of worship or teaching, criminal prosecution, forced relocation, administrative monitoring, social stigma, or exclusion.

Case #1 on Ahmadiyya presents the clearest example: Ahmadiyya members faced restriction of religious teaching, local pressure, violence, displacement, and difficulty in exercising worship. The state's response did not consistently guarantee protection for the community as rights-bearing citizens. Case #2 on Gafatar shows another form of asymmetry: followers were treated through relocation, return programmes, and rehabilitation, positioning them as objects of social correction rather than citizens entitled to freedom of belief. In Case #3, the rights implication appeared through criminal prosecution of spiritual claims. In the provincial cases, asymmetry was less violent but still significant: monitoring, guidance, restrictions on dissemination, social exclusion, stigma, and administrative attention based on doctrinal concerns.

Table 5. Rights Implications Across the Seven Cases

Type of Rights Impact	No. of Cases	Manifestation	Example Cases	Observed Pattern
Restriction of worship or teaching	4 of 7	Ban, monitoring, prohibition of dissemination, or restriction of activity	Case #1, #4, #5, #7	Religious expression restricted when labelled as deviant
Violence, intimidation, or displacement	2 of 7	Attack, threat, displacement, or forced relocation	Case #1, #2	State protection becomes delayed or insufficient in high-pressure cases
Criminal prosecution	1 of 7	Prosecution of spiritual or religious claims	Case #3	Legal instruments used to criminalise contested belief claims
Administrative monitoring or social stigma	5 of 7	Guidance, surveillance, stigma, exclusion, administrative attention	Case #1, #4, #5, #6, #7	Softer control produces vulnerability without direct violence
Forced relocation or rehabilitation	1 of 7	Return programme, relocation, or ideological guidance	Case #2	Minority followers treated as objects of correction rather than rights-bearing citizens

Table 5 shows that asymmetrical protection occurs in both direct and indirect forms. Note that the cumulative case count across all five categories (4+2+1+5+1 = 13) exceeds seven because individual cases may experience more than one type of rights impact simultaneously; the figures in the 'No. of Cases' column refer to the number of cases exhibiting each category of impact, not the total of unique cases. The comparison across seven cases demonstrates that the majority concerns were more easily translated into public-order claims, while minority rights were often subordinated to stability considerations. This finding strengthens the article's main argument that policy ambiguity produces uneven protection and weakens the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion or belief.

3. From Patterns to Mechanisms: Understanding Strategic Ambiguity in Religious Governance

The findings from the seven cases show that policy inconsistency in Indonesia's governance of groups accused of religious deviance is best understood as strategic ambiguity. The patterns identified in the Results, selective law enforcement, reactive government response, selective adoption of MUI recommendations, and asymmetrical protection of rights are consistent with Dunn's concept of policy ambiguity. From Dunn's perspective (2002, 2015), policy ambiguity emerges when formal

objectives are unclear, competing, or difficult to translate into consistent implementation. In this study, ambiguity appears because the state is expected to maintain public order and religious harmony while also protecting freedom of religion or belief. These competing objectives create space for discretionary implementation, allowing different state actors to choose different policy instruments across cases (Septiadi, 2023).

This ambiguity is not merely a technical weakness. It becomes strategic because it enables the government to respond flexibly to different social and political contexts. This understanding extends earlier uses of strategic ambiguity in organisational communication (Eisenberg, 1984) by locating the concept within the field of public policy implementation: it refers not only to ambiguous communication, but also to the use or toleration of unclear legal thresholds, overlapping authority, and discretionary instruments in governing religious controversy. In high-pressure cases such as Ahmadiyya and Gafatar, ambiguity allowed the state to justify restrictive measures in the name of public order and social stability. In lower-salience provincial cases such as Nurul Insan Haq and LINI, ambiguity allowed local institutions to adopt softer measures such as clarification, guidance, monitoring, and administrative restriction. This variation shows that the state does not operate through a single uniform legal threshold but adjusts its response according to public pressure, local demographic context, institutional risk, and the symbolic force of religious authority (Coleman et al., 2021; Irawan & Adnan, 2021; Stone, 2008).

Blumer's symbolic interactionism (1986) helps explain how a group becomes defined as a policy problem before state intervention occurs. A group is not treated as deviant only because of a legal category, but because its meaning is shaped through interaction among religious authorities, community actors, media narratives, state officials, and affected groups (Blumer, 2013; Venturini, 2012). In the Gafatar case, media-based chronologies and public reports connected the group to missing-person narratives, collective migration to West Kalimantan, and public anxiety, transforming "deviance" from a theological label into a public-order category and making prohibition, relocation, and rehabilitation appear as necessary state responses (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Irawan & Adnan, 2021). In the North Sulawesi cases, by contrast, the same category was processed through clarification and local stabilisation, producing a more cautious response.

What sustains this inconsistency is the interaction between three mechanisms that together explain why policy ambiguity persists as a recurring governance pattern. First, political risk calculation encourages authorities to respond more strongly when a case attracts public mobilisation or media attention, and more cautiously when controversy remains local and contained. Second, institutional fragmentation allows different actors, including local governments, police, religious affairs offices, the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB, Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama), and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) to interpret the same case through different mandates and priorities, a dynamic consistent with broader findings on ambiguity and conflict in policy implementation (Coleman et al., 2021). Third, social labelling transforms religious difference into a perceived threat, making restriction or monitoring appear necessary for maintaining stability and providing symbolic justification for selective state action. These three mechanisms are not independent; they reinforce one another. When public pressure is high, political risk calculation intensifies, institutional actors converge around restrictive responses, and social labelling becomes more pronounced as seen in the Ahmadiyya and Gafatar cases. When public pressure is low, the same mechanisms operate more loosely, producing softer and more localised responses, as seen in the North Sulawesi cases.

This study proposes strategic ambiguity as its main theoretical contribution not as an entirely new term (cf. Eisenberg, 1984), but as a refined and contextualised concept for the study of religious governance. Compared with organisational theories, this article emphasises how ambiguity operates through state institutions, legal instruments, religious authority, and rights-related consequences. Compared with policy ambiguity literature, this article adds a symbolic-interactionist dimension by showing how ambiguous policy responses are preceded by the social construction of certain groups as deviant. Strategic ambiguity refers to the deliberate or tolerated use of unclear thresholds, flexible

authority, and discretionary instruments to manage religious controversy, enabling the state to balance competing demands between social stability, majoritarian religious expectations, and constitutional rights. However, this flexibility produces legal uncertainty, selective enforcement, and unequal protection for minority groups accused of religious deviance. Policy inconsistency is therefore not merely a technical failure of implementation; it is a governance pattern produced by the interaction between contested meaning-making and discretionary policy instruments operating within a fragmented institutional field.

3.1. Dialogue with Existing Literature

The findings of this study support previous scholarship showing that public-order concerns, majority pressure, and the authority of religious institutions shape Indonesia's governance of religious minorities. The pattern of reactive enforcement confirms studies on Ahmadiyya and other minority communities, which show that state intervention often intensifies after theological disagreement becomes a public controversy framed as a threat to social stability (Abbas, McNeil-Willson, & Vostermans, 2025; Berger, 2018). This finding resonates with Crouch's (2015) analysis of how legal instruments regulating religion in Myanmar can produce restrictive effects under social and political pressure, a dynamic this study finds similarly at work, albeit through different institutional channels, in the Indonesian context.

However, the findings also complicate studies that place primary emphasis on formal legal instruments as the main source of restriction. If legal design alone determined state response, similar accusations of religious deviance would produce relatively similar policy outcomes. The seven cases show otherwise: Ahmadiyya and Gafatar generated restrictive and nationally visible responses, while Nurul Insan Haq and LINI in North Sulawesi were addressed through clarification, monitoring, guidance, and warnings against anarchic public action. This variation suggests that legal ambiguity becomes politically meaningful only when it interacts with public pressure, local demographic context, institutional risk calculation, and the symbolic authority of religious actors (Butt, 2020; Crouch, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2016; Irawan & Adnan, 2021; Ropi, 2017).

The findings also qualify literature that portrays MUI authority as directly translated into coercive state policy. While the Ahmadiyya and Gafatar cases confirm that MUI-related religious authority can legitimise restriction, the provincial cases show a more differentiated pattern. In North Sulawesi, MUI fatwas functioned not only as doctrinal judgments but also as instruments of clarification, local stabilisation, and prevention of vigilante action still producing stigma and administrative restriction, but through varied channels depending on public salience, local majority-minority relations, and the willingness of state actors to convert religious recommendations into legal or administrative measures. This finding complements and refines previous studies on MUI by demonstrating that religious authority is influential but not mechanically determinative (Hasyim, 2020; Menchik, 2022).

This study expands the existing literature in three ways. First, it shows that inconsistency does not occur only because the law is unclear, but because legal ambiguity interacts with local discretion and symbolic labelling (Tampubolon, 2025). Second, it demonstrates that MUI's influence is significant but not uniform functioning as a legitimating force in nationally visible cases but as a stabilising and clarifying instrument in lower-salience provincial contexts (Hasyim, 2020). Third, this study shows that the same label of "deviance" can produce different policy outcomes depending on whether it is linked to national controversy, local social pressure, or limited institutional concern (Butt, 2020). This finding refines Crouch's analysis of law and religion in Indonesia (2011) by showing that legal ambiguity does not operate only through national regulation or judicial interpretation, but also through local implementation, administrative discretion, and the selective translation of religious authority into state action.

At the same time, the findings challenge any explanation that treats government inconsistency merely as weak law enforcement. The seven cases show that inconsistency follows a recognisable pattern shaped by the interaction of political risk, institutional fragmentation, and symbolic labelling

and should therefore be understood as a flexible governance strategy rather than simply institutional failure (Coleman et al., 2021; Crouch, 2011; Irawan & Adnan, 2021; Mujtahid, Ali, & Nur Ichwan, 2025).

3.2. Implications and Policy Recommendations

The findings reveal a persistent tension between Indonesia's domestic model of religious regulation which often justifies intervention in the name of public order, religious harmony, and social stability and international human rights standards, which require that any restriction on freedom of religion or belief be lawful, necessary, proportionate, and non-discriminatory (Bielefeldt, 2020; Bielefeldt, Ghanea, & Wiener, 2016; Gunatilleke, 2020). The seven cases show that these standards are difficult to maintain when state action is shaped by public pressure, symbolic religious labelling, and local political calculation. In high-pressure cases such as Ahmadiyya and Gafatar, public-order reasoning justified restriction, prohibition, relocation, and criminal prosecution, while the provincial cases in North Sulawesi despite adopting softer instruments such as monitoring, guidance, and restrictions on dissemination still produced stigma and unequal protection for the accused groups (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Irawan & Adnan, 2021; Irawan et al., 2022; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2024). This pattern indicates that the tension between social stability and constitutional rights protection is not a temporary governance failure, but a structural feature of how accusations of aliran sesat are currently processed in Indonesia.

This tension carries direct implications for Indonesian democracy, which requires not only electoral participation but also equal citizenship and protection for vulnerable minorities (Akbaba, 2023; Hurriyah, 2020; Schäfer, 2019). When groups accused of religious deviance are treated primarily as sources of disorder and, as in the Gafatar case, as objects of social correction through relocation and rehabilitation rather than as rights-bearing citizens, the state risks weakening the principle of equal protection before the law. The broader efforts to strengthen religious moderation in Indonesia, as documented by Jubba, Awang, and Sungkilang (2021), face similar structural challenges: conservative pressures, contested authority, and limited social recognition of religious difference mean that moderation initiatives cannot succeed without clearer rights-based frameworks for handling accusations of deviance. Social stability achieved through ambiguous restriction therefore remains fragile; it may reduce immediate conflict, but at the cost of legal certainty and unequal citizenship.

Because the main problem identified in this article is strategic ambiguity, the following policy recommendations are intended to reduce the discretionary space that allows unclear thresholds, overlapping authority, and selective enforcement to persist. First, the government should establish clearer procedural thresholds for intervention: accusations of religious deviance should not automatically lead to restriction unless there is clear evidence of direct harm, incitement to violence, fraud, coercion, or violation of a clearly defined legal standard (Bagir, Asfinawati, Suhadi, & Arianingtyas, 2020; Bielefeldt, 2020; Gunatilleke, 2020). Second, the state needs a rights-based early response mechanism involving local governments, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, police, FKUB, the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM), civil society organisations, and relevant religious leaders, prioritising verification, mediation, and protection of vulnerable groups before conflict escalates (Bagir et al., 2020; Hurriyah, 2023; United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2024). Third, the government should clarify the relationship between religious authority and state authority: MUI fatwas may function as religious guidance but should not automatically become the basis for coercive state action without legal scrutiny, due process, and constitutional safeguards (Bielefeldt, 2020; Butt, 2020; Gunatilleke, 2020; Hasyim, 2020; Ilahi, Irfan, Kamarusdiana, Hidayatulloh, & Zulfa, 2024; Menchik, 2022). Fourth, the state should develop a protection protocol for communities accused of religious deviance, including protection from intimidation, forced relocation, discriminatory local regulations, and denial of worship or identity rights.

Table 6. Findings and Policy Recommendations

Finding	Policy Problem	Recommendation	Relevant Actors
Selective law enforcement based on social impact	Legal instruments applied unevenly depending on public pressure	Establish clear procedural thresholds for intervention	Ministry of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, police, local governments
Reactive government response	State action often occurs after controversy or conflict escalates	Develop rights-based early response and mediation mechanisms	Local governments, FKUB, Komnas HAM, police, civil society
Selective adoption of MUI recommendations	Religious guidance may become quasi-legal basis for restriction	Separate religious fatwa from coercive state action through due process	Government, MUI, courts, human rights institutions
Asymmetrical protection of rights	Minority groups treated as sources of disorder rather than rights-bearing citizens	Create protection protocols for accused minority communities	Police, Komnas HAM, local governments, civil society

Taken together, the recommendations in Table 6 directly address the mechanisms of strategic ambiguity identified in this study. Clear procedural thresholds respond to unclear standards of intervention; rights-based early response mechanisms reduce reactive enforcement; separation between religious fatwa and coercive state action limits the automatic translation of symbolic religious authority into policy restriction; and protection protocols address the asymmetrical treatment of accused minority communities. A more democratic approach would require the state to separate theological disagreement from legally demonstrable harm, prevent vigilante pressure from shaping policy decisions, and ensure that the governance of alleged religious deviance moves from reactive control toward rights-based prevention, transparent procedure, and equal protection before the law.

3.3. Research Limitations

First, it analyses seven selected cases between 2000 and 2020, so the findings cannot represent all cases of alleged religious deviance in Indonesia. The selected cases were chosen because they show variation in public pressure, religious authority involvement, type of accusation, geographical context, and form of government response. However, other cases in different provinces may show additional patterns not captured in this study.

Second, the analysis relies primarily on documents, regulations, fatwas, reports, case chronologies, and secondary literature. This document-based approach allows the study to compare policy patterns across cases, but it cannot fully reconstruct internal deliberations within government institutions, law enforcement agencies, or religious authorities (Campbell et al., 2020; Goodrick, 2020). If interview data are limited or unavailable, the study cannot claim to capture the complete reasoning of policymakers, religious leaders, or affected communities.

Third, this study acknowledges that the concept of strategic ambiguity is used as an analytical framework to explain recurring governance patterns, not to make claims about intentionality at the level of individual actors. The analysis does not seek to determine whether particular officials, institutions, or religious authorities consciously designed ambiguity in every case. Rather, it shows how unclear thresholds, overlapping authority, discretionary instruments, and socially constructed labels repeatedly produce selective and uneven outcomes in the governance of groups accused of aliran sesat. This limitation clarifies the analytical scope while maintaining the main argument that ambiguity functions as a recurring pattern in Indonesia's religious governance.

3.4. Further Research Directions

Future research should increase the number of cases and expand the geographical range. A larger dataset would allow researchers to examine whether public pressure, demographic composition, election cycles, media coverage, or MUI involvement affects the likelihood of restrictive state action (DeLeo, Zohlnhöfer, & Zahariadis, 2024; Menchik, 2022; Zahariadis, 2023). Quantitative studies could help test whether the patterns identified in this article occur systematically across provinces and time periods.

Further research should also incorporate interviews with policymakers, local government officials, police, prosecutors, MUI representatives, FKUB members, human rights advocates, and affected communities. Such interviews would provide deeper insight into how decisions are made, how risks are assessed, and how actors interpret the meaning of religious deviance. It would strengthen the analysis of strategic ambiguity by connecting documentary evidence with the lived experiences and institutional reasoning of key actors.

Comparative research is also needed. Future studies could compare Indonesia with Malaysia, Egypt, or other plural societies where religious authority, public order, and minority rights interact in complex ways. Longitudinal studies could trace how policy instruments evolve, especially after major legal or political changes. Finally, policy-oriented research could test alternative early response mechanisms, including rights-based mediation, interfaith dialogue, and protection protocols to assess which approaches are most effective in preventing conflict while safeguarding freedom of religion or belief.

4. Conclusions

This article demonstrates that the governance of groups accused of aliran sesat characterised by patterns of selective enforcement, reactive response, selective adoption of MUI fatwas, and asymmetrical rights protection, driven by political risk calculation, institutional fragmentation, and social labelling reveals a deeper problem in Indonesia's management of religious diversity: the absence of clear, rights-based, and consistently applied thresholds for state intervention, with significant consequences for legal certainty and minority rights. The significance of the findings lies not only in showing that government responses are reactive, selective, and uneven, but also in explaining how such unevenness becomes a recurring mode of governance. In this context, social stability is often pursued through flexible and discretionary responses, while the constitutional protection of freedom of religion or belief remains vulnerable to public pressure, religious labelling, and institutional risk calculation. It has broader implications for plural societies, where the challenge is not merely to prevent conflict, but to ensure that conflict prevention does not weaken equal citizenship and minority rights.

The main contribution of this study is its integration of Dunn's policy framework and Blumer's symbolic interactionism. Dunn's framework explains how unclear policy objectives, fragmented authority, and discretionary policy instruments produce uneven implementation. Blumer's perspective explains how the label of "deviance" is socially constructed through interaction among religious authorities, state actors, community groups, and media narratives. This integration advances existing scholarship by demonstrating that policy inconsistency in religious governance cannot be fully explained by institutional ambiguity or social labelling alone; rather, it emerges when contested meanings of deviance are translated into discretionary policy instruments through fragmented state and religious authority. Therefore, policy inconsistency is not merely a technical failure of implementation, but a governance pattern shaped by contested meanings, institutional discretion, and competing demands between social stability and human rights protection.

This study recommends that the government establish clearer procedural thresholds, transparent justification standards, stronger coordination among institutions, and rights-based early-response mechanisms for handling accusations of religious deviance. Religious authority recommendations may inform public policy, but they should not automatically become the basis for coercive state action

without due process and constitutional safeguards. Since this study relies mainly on selected documented cases, future research should expand the number of cases, include interviews with policymakers and affected communities, and conduct comparative studies across provinces or countries to further test the concept of strategic ambiguity in religious governance.

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