

# Muhammadiyah's Moderation Stance in the 2019 General Election: Critical Views from Within

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**Submission date:** 18-Feb-2020 09:59AM (UTC+0700)

**Submission ID:** 1259247815

**File name:** uhammadiyah\_s\_Moderation\_Stance\_in\_the\_2019\_General\_Election.pdf (573.88K)

**Word count:** 7940

**Character count:** 47431

## **MUHAMMADIYAH'S MODERATION STANCE IN THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTION Critical Views from Within**

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### **Abstract**

*This study focuses on the way in which Muhammadiyah, one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organizations, stood in the 2019 General Election. Like its counterpart Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah has marked the moderation of Islam in Indonesia, different from Islam elsewhere in the Middle East. Since its establishment, Muhammadiyah has urged its members not to join any specific political party, but rather to take a moderate position in political pragmatism and support patriotism in broader national interest. Likewise, in the 2019 election, Muhammadiyah did not organizationally support any candidates, citing its "middle way" approach. However, this study identifies a dualism in the political attitudes of Muhammadiyah's elites. Even without official orders or prohibitions from the central leadership, some Muhammadiyah members got involved and carried their organization's attributes to support certain candidates, resulting in political division within the organization. Some members of the organization took a clear political stance, whereas others remain neutral. This created tension within the organization in both elite and grass-root level. The main data for this study were collected through interviews, unstructured discussions, and focus group discussions with several Muhammadiyah elites.*

*[Artikel ini melibat posisi yang diambil salah satu organisasi Islam terbesar di Indonesia, Muhammadiyah, dalam Pemilu 2019. Bersamaan dengan*

*Nabdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah menjadi penanda moderasi Islam di Indonesia yang berbeda dengan Islam di tempat lain. Sejak didirikan, Muhammadiyah telah menandatangani untuk tidak berafiliasi dengan partai politik tertentu, tetapi mengambil posisi moderat dalam perpolitikan dan mendukung patriotisme demi kepentingan nasional yang lebih luas. Demikian juga, dalam Pemilu 2019, Muhammadiyah secara resmi tidak mendukung calon mana pun berdasarkan konsep “jalan tengah”. Namun, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi adanya dualisme dalam sikap politik para elit Muhammadiyah. Tidak adanya perintah atau larangan resmi dari pusat, banyak anggota Muhammadiyah yang membawa atribut organisasi dan terlibat aktivitas politik serta mendukung kandidat tertentu. Ini berakibat munculnya keterbelahan politik dalam Muhammadiyah. Beberapa anggota mengambil sikap politik yang jelas, sedangkan yang lain tetap netral. Ini menimbulkan ketegangan dalam organisasi, baik di tingkat elit maupun akar rumput. Data utama untuk penelitian ini dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, diskusi tidak terstruktur, dan diskusi kelompok terfokus dengan beberapa elit Muhammadiyah.]*

**Keywords:** Indonesian general election, Muhammadiyah, Islamic politics, Islamic movement

## A. Introduction

Muhammadiyah, as Indonesia’s second-largest Islamic organization after Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), has become a major force in Indonesian society.<sup>1</sup> These two organizations have worked to develop a moderate understanding of Islam in the country.<sup>2</sup> Established on November 18, 1912, Muhammadiyah has survived because of its solidarity, extensive networks, and activities in the fields of education, health, and poverty alleviation.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, its political involvement is reflected more in

<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Alpha Amirrahman, Andar Nubowo, and Azaki Khoirudin (eds.), *Islam Berkemajuan untuk Peradaban Dunia: Refleksi dan Agenda Muhammadiyah ke Depan* (Bandung: Mizan, 2015), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town, c.1910s-2010*, 2nd edition (Singapore:

national politics than in political parties.<sup>4</sup>

Alfian mentions that Muhammadiyah is a non-political movement and as such it must be distinguished from organizations that make politics their profession. It tries not to involve itself in politics directly and openly. Previously, Muhammadiyah had been involved in such political movements as Syarikat Islam and Parmusi, with its political role being determined by a sort of situational logic.<sup>5</sup> In the 1955 General Election, Muhammadiyah was part of the Masjumi Party.<sup>6</sup>

Muhammadiyah has long been assumed to follow a “middle way” in its political activities, not prohibiting members from being active in political parties but also not encouraging such membership. This reflects Muhammadiyah's moderate view towards its members. Muhammadiyah remains political, but is not about which not a political party the members should join and, in other words, it does not support a particular political party.<sup>7</sup> It instead concentrates its activities on national politics for the sake of a broader national interest in keeping the unity and harmony of the nation.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, there has been a ‘tug of war’ between Muhammadiyah members who desire political participation and those who do not.

## B. Muhammadiyah's Political Involvement

Although Muhammadiyah has not always been politically active, its contributions to Indonesian Islamic thought and movement have

<sup>3</sup> ISEAS Publishing, 2012), p. 175; Robin Bush, *A Snapshot of Muhammadiyah Social Change and Shifting Markers of Identity and Values*, Working Paper, no. 221 (Singapore: Asia Research Institute, NUS, 2014), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Saleh Partaonan Daulay and Abd. Rohim Ghazali (eds.), *Muhammadiyah dan Politik Islam Inklusif: 70 tahun Ahmad Syafii Maarif* (Jakarta: Maarif Institute for Culture and Humanity, 2005), p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> Alfian, *Muhammadiyah: The political behavior of a Muslim modernist organization under Dutch colonialism* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1989), p. 169.

<sup>6</sup> Syaifullah, *Gerak Politik Muhammadiyah dalam Masyumi* (Jakarta: Grafiti, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Zuly Qodir, Achmad Nurmandi, and M. Nurul Yamin (eds.), *Ijtihad Politik Muhammadiyah: Politik sebagai Amal Usaba* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar & Jusuf Kalla School of Government, 2015), pp. 133–43.

<sup>8</sup> Suaidi Asyari, ‘Gerakan Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam di Indonesia’, *Miqot: Jurnal Ilmu-ilmu Keislaman*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2011), pp. 295–313.

been significant.<sup>9</sup> The organization's involvement in shaping the state is also apparent.<sup>10</sup> Muhammadiyah members, who are spread throughout Indonesia—even in rural areas of Java—seem to concentrate more on developing moderate and progressive Islamic da'wah activities.<sup>11</sup>

Muhammadiyah claims to have 25 million members, 10,000 schools and kindergartens, 174 universities, and 5000 hospitals. As such, since its establishment in 1912, Muhammadiyah has shown significant concern for education, health, and human development.<sup>12</sup>

Muhammadiyah's considerable size has attracted many politicians and political parties. However, given the organization's focus on non-political activities, members who become active in practical politics do not officially use Muhammadiyah attributes; this was seen, for example, in the 2019 General Election. Although, Muhammadiyah members are seen as using a particular party—the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional)—to channel Muhammadiyah's organizational aspirations, the organization has still clearly distinguished between members' roles as members and their political activities by not expressly supporting a presidential candidate in the 2019 General Election.

Between 2016 and 2018, Indonesian national politics were shaken by three large demonstrations protesting purportedly blasphemous statements made by Jakarta's incumbent governor Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (Ahok) in the lead-up to the Jakarta gubernatorial election. The first action, held at City Hall in October 2016, did not draw widespread public attention. However, the second and third actions—labelled 'Aksi Bela Islam' (Actions to Defend Islam), but popularly known as the 411

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<sup>9</sup> M. Syafi'i Anwar, *Pemikiran dan Aksi Islam Indonesia: Sebuah kajian politik tentang cendekiawan Muslim Orde Baru* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1995), pp. 119–25; Bahtiar Effendy, *Islam dan Negara: Transformasi Gagasan dan Praktik Politik Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1998), pp. 79–84. 2

<sup>10</sup> Ahmad Syafii Maarif, *Islam dan Masalah Kenegaraan: Studi tentang Pecaturan dalam Konstituante* (Jakarta: Lembaga Penelitian Pendidikan dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial, 1985), pp. 179–95. 4

<sup>11</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Muhammadiyah Berkemajuan: Pergeseran dari Puritanisme ke Kosmopolitanisme* (Bandung: Mizan, 2016), pp. 35–7; Hyung-Jun Kim, *Reformist Muslims in Yogyakarta Village: The Islamic Transformation of Contemporary Socio-religious Life* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2007), pp. 123–4.

<sup>12</sup> Bush, *A Snapshot of Muhammadiyah*, p. 3.

Action and 212 Action—caught the attention of the Indonesian public and even foreign observers. Many people identified these protests, attended by 5–7 million people dressed in white, as “people power movements” and populist Islamic movement. Such undercurrents of Islamic populism were revealed by Vedi R. Hadiz in his study of demonstrations in the Middle East and Indonesia.<sup>13</sup>

These protests—among the numerous conflicts between moderate and intolerant Muslims that have occurred since the fall of President Soeharto in 1998<sup>14</sup>—gained widespread attention due to several factors, including political, economic, legal, citizenship, and cultural ones. Muslims from various regions and organizations attended these protests, urging the government to take firm action against the alleged blasphemy. Some participants stated that President Joko Widodo was a weak leader unable to enforce the law and guarantee the public welfare. Similar claims were made by the orators, most of whom were antagonistic against the ruling government. This perceived weakness led to reduced public satisfaction with Joko Widodo's government. According to one survey by the Indonesian Survey Institute, 46,4% of respondents were not satisfied with the Joko Widodo-Jusuf Kalla government.<sup>15</sup>

In the lead-up to the 2019 General Election, national and local political conditions remained tense. Sensitive issues, such as religion and communism, became commodities for demonstrations, and hate speech was common on the internet. Supporters of the two presidential candidates, Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto, were highly polarized.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Vedi R. Hadiz, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Noorhaidi Hasan, “Religious Diversity and Blasphemy Law: Understanding Growing Religious Conflict and Intolerance in Post-Suharto Indonesia”, *Al-Jāmi'ab: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2017), pp. 105–26.

<sup>15</sup> Abraham Utama, “Poltracking: Sistem Komunikasi Publik Jokowi Harus Dibenahi”, *CNNIndonesia-Nasional*, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20150419175143-32-47730/poltracking-sistem-komunikasi-publik-jokowi-harus-dibenahi>, accessed 17 May 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander R. Arifianto, “Is Islam an increasingly polarizing political cleavage in Indonesia?”, *Brookings* (25 Apr 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/04/25/is-islam-an-increasingly-polarizing-political-cleavage-in-indonesia/>, accessed 19 May 2019.

In this highly charged atmosphere, Indonesian Muslims were similarly polarized. Muslims, including members of Muhammadiyah, got involved in practical political movements, supporting presidential candidates and their policies.<sup>17</sup> Muslims were pushed apart, and mainstream Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah and NU were stuck in the middle,<sup>18</sup> caught between political involvement and neutrality. The democracy in Indonesia, where Muslims are a majority, was becoming less tolerant.<sup>19</sup>

Muhammadiyah chose neutrality. However, it still faced significant challenges. Members were polarized by their political ideologies and different understandings of Islam. At the central and regional level, Muhammadiyah members were interested in new Islamic broadcasters (including short online videos) and leaders (such as those in new Islamic mass organizations). The Deputy of the Tarjih Council at the Muhammadiyah Central Leadership, MA Fatah Santoso discussed this issue:

Muhammadiyah is currently facing a serious challenge to its *da'wah*, to its spreading *Islam rahmatan lil alamin* and *Islam wasathiyah* (moderate Islam). This has happened because a number of Islamic broadcasters are spreading understandings of Islam that are not the same as Muhammadiyah's, but have attracted Muhammadiyah members from the central to the regional level. If not handled properly, in the future many members and leaders of Muhammadiyah will have non-Muhammadiyah ideologies.<sup>20</sup>

That has helped influence Muhammadiyah's political attitude. Even though the Muhammadiyah Central Leadership did not campaign for candidates, in reality members still supported them. Some leaders even openly became part of candidates' campaign teams. "The different political attitudes of Muhammadiyah's leaders and members come from

<sup>17</sup> Alexander R. Arifianto, "Practicing What It Preaches? Understanding the Contradictions between Pluralist Theology and Religious Intolerance within Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama", *Al-Jami'ab: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2017), pp. 241–64.

<sup>18</sup> Achmad Zainal Arifin, "Defending Traditions, Countering Intolerant Ideologies: Re-energizing the Role of Modin in Modern Java", *Al-Jami'ab: Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2017), pp. 265–92.

<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 120–2.

<sup>20</sup> MA. Fatah Santoso, FGD interview (16 Feb 2019).

a non-Muhammadiyah Islamic understanding, which tends to be a Salafi jihadist or political mode of *Ihkwani* Muslimin or *tarbawi*.<sup>21</sup>

### C. Muhammadiyah's Political Attitude

Muhammadiyah, as a major Islamic organization in Muslim-majority Indonesia,<sup>22</sup> asserts that Islam in Indonesia does not require numerous imams. Rather, Indonesian Islam requires Muslim leaders who can demonstrate political views and be good political representatives of Muslims. In present-day Indonesia, political parties with Islamic ideologies such as the Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera*, PKS) and the United Development Party (*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*, PPP) have committed criminal acts of corruption and other improper acts, and as such have been argued to not represent Muslims accurately.

The Central Chairman of Muhammadiyah, Dadang Kahmad, firmly stated that:

Our respectable imam as an organization is the Chairman of Muhammadiyah Central. We do not know the term 'High Priest of Islam' in Indonesia. We view all scholars as respected leaders. However, there are no 'high priests' or 'low priests'. All of them contribute to the progress of the nation and Indonesia's Muslims. We do not need various titles to help Muslims who are suffering from various national problems. Muhammadiyah is more interested in developing the nation's society and social welfare, rather than religious titles.<sup>23</sup>

When involved in practical politics, religious leaders (Islamic organizations) cannot call themselves "Muhammadiyah" or "NU". There's is a self-representation, wherein individuals join political and party activities of their own will. Moreover, Muhammadiyah did not support any candidates in the 2019 General Election. Muhammadiyah's General Secretary stated that:

Muhammadiyah gives its members rights in both local and general

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<sup>21</sup> Syafiq Mugni, interview (18 Mar 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Saiful Mujani, *Muslim Demokrat: Islam, budaya demokrasi, dan partisipasi politik di Indonesia pasca Orde Baru* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama-Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat- Yayasan Wakaf Paramadina- Freedom Institute-Kedutaan Besar Denmark, 2007), pp. 233–5.

<sup>23</sup> Dadang Kahmad, interview (18 Mar 2019).



elections. There is no prohibition, or order to choose a specific candidate. Muhammadiyah members are smart and politically mature. There is no need for direction or political mobilization.<sup>24</sup>

Even though Muhammadiyah lets followers choose their own candidates, this does not mean the organization ignores the nation's problems. Muhammadiyah questions the neutrality of the Indonesian National Armed Forces and the Indonesian National Police, which seem to have stemmed peaceful protests such as *istighosah*. The Chief of Police even recommended that citizens avoid political activities before the election or hold *istighosah* in their respective regions.<sup>25</sup> It also maintained excellent collaboration with the Joko Widodo – Jusuf Kalla government; the General Secretary identified Widodo as having visited the most often.<sup>26</sup>

Muhammadiyah, as a modern socio-religious organization, issued a circular before the election that urged members to focus on bigger issues rather than peaceful protests. However, this circular received suboptimal responses from leaders at the provincial, regency, and district levels. Many Muhammadiyah followers and leaders—mostly from West Java, Yogyakarta, Central Java, and Bali—joined the protests in Jakarta. Some considered these actions as defending Islam and as a form of *jihād*, rather than a protest of Widodo's regime.

Muhammadiyah's General Secretary, Abdul Mu'thi, stated that the organization would not become involved in practical politics, support candidates, or do similar actions. It would focus on national politics. Any political activities could not be done in the name of Muhammadiyah. As such, Muhammadiyah members involved in the activities of the National Movement to Guard the Fatwa of Ulama (Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa, GNPF) and Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI) were officially acting as individuals—even when they claimed to represent Muhammadiyah. This was, of course, detrimental to the organization.

<sup>24</sup> Abdul Mukti, interview (18 Mar 2019).

<sup>25</sup> See Fx Ismanto, "Forum Ulama BPI KPNPA RI Gelar *Istighosah* Di Jambi Berikan Rasa Aman & Damai", *Tribunnews.com* (24 Mar 2018), <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2018/03/24/forum-ulama-bpi-kpnpa-ri-gelar-istighosah-di-jambi-berikan-rasa-aman-damai>, accessed 17 May 2019.

<sup>26</sup> "Dalam Sejarah, Jokowi Presiden Terbanyak Silaturahmi Ke Muhammadiyah", *Getar.id* (6 Apr 2019), <http://getar.id/2019/04/06/dalam-sejarah-jokowi-presiden-terbanyak-silaturahmi-ke-muhammadiyah/>, accessed 18 May 2019.

Muhammadiyah is aware of the difficulty. When Muslims want to carry out practical political work, engaging in supportive action means supporting a presidential candidate. Muhammadiyah, however, stands by its choice to focus on national politics. Such politics are very noble, though not without risk. We know that Muhammadiyah will be a topic of conversation, but we are sure to not get involved in practical politics. Muhammadiyah invites its members to get involved in practical politics, but not on behalf of Muhammadiyah.<sup>27</sup>

According to the General Secretary's statement, Muhammadiyah did not officially support the *Aksi Damai* (Peace Action) held on March 30, 2019, in Jakarta or similar protests. However, Muhammadiyah activists from various parts of Indonesia were present and involved. Some members regretted the organization's neutrality; for example, Dahnil Anzar Simanjuntak—the former chairman of the Muhammadiyah Youth Organization (*Organisasi Pemuda Muhammadiyah*)—took part in the *Aksi Damai* as the spokesperson for Presidential Candidate Prabowo Subianto. Likewise, some Muhammadiyah leaders from Jakarta, West Java, and Bali participated in the peaceful protests before the 2019 Presidential Election.

Recognizing members support for candidates, the Muhammadiyah Central Chairperson stated that the organization felt that the need to avoid using Muhammadiyah attributes was significant. Similarly, the General Secretary of Muhammadiyah highlighted the importance of maintaining neutrality:

We are part of Muhammadiyah, from the central to the branch level. If you feel uneasy with Muhammadiyah and disagree with the Islamic ideology promoted by Muhammadiyah, please choose another group. If you are interested in HTI, Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI/ Indonesian Mujahedeen Council), PKS, Salafi, or something similar, please leave Muhammadiyah. Let us take care of leaders and followers who agree with Muhammadiyah's organizational lines. Muhammadiyah never 'fires' its followers. But it does not mean bringing other ideologies into Muhammadiyah will be acceptable. Such behavior is a violation of organizational ethics.<sup>28</sup>

The statement above implies that there is a “struggle for Islamic

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<sup>27</sup> Abdul Mukti, interview (18 Mar 2019).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

ideology” within Muhammadiyah, specifically between its ideology of moderate (*wasatiyyah*) Islam and political Islamic ideologies that tends to belittle the government. As a result, Muhammadiyah members were divided between practical political movement and cultural activities.

*Ustaz* (scholars of Islam) who attend and even promote political protests, including Abdul Somad, Bahtiar Nasir, Yusuf Mansur, Adi Hidayat, Hanan Ataqi, are popular among Muhammadiyah members, even more so than *ustaz* such as Yunahar Ilyas, Hamim Ilyas, Faturrahman Kamal, and Gunawan. This can be seen in members involvement in Muhammadiyah activities. This was confirmed by members in West Java, who stated:

One day, the West Java PWM invited the Central Chairperson of Muhammadiyah to speak at its Mujahidin Mosque. We had expected some 2000 people, but only around 200 people registered. Finally, the committee asked the Muhammadiyah hospitals, middle schools, and high schools in Bandung to attend the recitation because we were ashamed. The Chairperson was received by so few people. Meanwhile, when Bahtiar Nasir and Amien Rais came, 5,000 Muhammadiyah members attended, some even coming from outside Bandung.<sup>29</sup>

#### D. Division of Political Power

Muhammadiyah’s leadership has become a standard for determining the division of power. Under the Joko Widodo government, there must be alternative means of accommodating the thoughts and political aspirations of the *ummah*.

Looking at the roles of Muhammadiyah, there are two applicable and profitable strategies. The first involves political activities oriented towards a “low” politics (real politics, practical politics) struggle for power, as done by political parties and formal political forces at the national level. The second involves community activities as well as indirect political activities (“high” politics) that offer the moral authority to improve people’s lives.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Muhammadiyah Regional Leadership, PDMP, and Nasyyatul Aisyiyah, Focus Group Discussion (West Java, February 24, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> Haedar Nashir, *Muhammadiyah Gerakan Pembaruan* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2010), pp. 2–5.

Muhammadiyah does many social events for its members, holding that the social aspect of community empowerment is no less critical and strategic than the political aspect of power. The creation of community leaders and strong civil society is a main pillar of Muhammadiyah's organizational struggle; meanwhile, power struggles are intended to form governments and formally and directly done by political parties and state political institutions through the prevailing political system. These are interconnected within a healthy political system by national forces working towards the realization of the country's goals.<sup>31</sup>

In the context of nationalism and the *ummah*, Muhammadiyah's leadership must respond to all of the nation's problems, either at the level of "low" politics or "high" politics. Muhammadiyah is expected to create figures who possess integrity and professionalism, through which it could unite Muslims at both the central and regional levels. As such, even with its organizational neutrality, Muhammadiyah has a strategic and vital role in national politics.

In present-day Indonesia, many outside Muhammadiyah have appeared and tried to attract the sympathy of the masses. This has hindered Muhammadiyah's activities. Before the general election, mass organizations such as FPI and GNPFMUI dominated the news cycle with their protests. Interviews with regional leaders in West Java suggested that Muhammadiyah was still unable to respond to Muslims' needs and the real condition of public politics in Indonesia. Muhammadiyah's political position is seen as problematic, being neither prohibitive or supportive:

Muhammadiyah's current leadership needs character management in its development of cadres. Such figures will strengthen the Islamic Ghiroh for Muslims. From there, Muhammadiyah can emerge as a leader, not FPI. If FPI were the leader, responsibilities would not be unclear. Unlike the Fajr Congregation Movement and Sharia Cooperative of 212 driven by the GNPFMUI, Muhammadiyah can draw positive energy from the Islamic *ummah* and propagate its struggle while responding to current national conditions.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, in a meeting with the Muhammadiyah Regional

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<sup>31</sup> Sidang Tanwir Muhammadiyah, *Khittah Muhammadiyah dalam Kehidupan Berbangsa dan Bernegara* (PP Muhammadiyah, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> Muhammad Ikhsan, interview (18 Mar 2019).

Leadership in West Java, members expressed their view that Muhammadiyah should take a political stance, seeing the 2019 General Election as a moment for Muhammadiyah to reformulate its approach to politics. Other mass organizations had taken advantage of Muhammadiyah's slow response to the alleged blasphemy to seize the political stage and lead Indonesia's Muslims. Muhammadiyah certainly did not expect Rizieq Shihab to become the leader of Indonesia's *ummah*, let alone a "high priest".

Based on the above analysis, Muhammadiyah elites' attitudes towards the organization's central leadership can be seen in their recommendations. See, for example, the below quote:

First, Muhammadiyah needs to place cadres appropriately and choose cadres with organizational competency. Second, it is necessary to reformulate Muhammadiyah's attitudes towards politics, economics, law, religion, and education. Third, "allocative politics" – the division of power. There needs to be a change in Muhammadiyah's attitude towards politics (from neutrality to allocative and advocative/responsive politics) both at the level of low politics and high politics. Muhammadiyah must take part in 'allocative politics' within the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.<sup>33</sup>

It seems that Muhammadiyah elites want the organization to act in both high and low politics. However, support for high politics is stronger than that for low politics, and as such some Muhammadiyah members felt unrepresented in the organization's neutrality in the 2019 General Election.

Muhammadiyah is better at national politics, which nurtures all citizens and helps the weak, rather than being political 'lipstick' that looks red but has no taste. Muhammadiyah must therefore work towards playing 'salty' politics. If so, it would not be invisible.<sup>34</sup>

Discussion with Muhammadiyah's regional leaders in West Java and Bali showed that members have different perceptions at the regional level. For example, in the above-mentioned provinces, members rejected the organizational neutrality asserted in Press Statement of the Muhammadiyah Central Leadership Number: 552/PER/I.0/A/2016

<sup>33</sup> Zulkarnaen, interview (18 Mar 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Ahmad Syafii Maarif, interview (20 Mar 2019).

(dated November 4, 2016) regarding Peaceful Demonstrations and its statement regarding the 2019 General Election. Followers asked two fundamental questions: What is Muhammadiyah's political formula? What is Muhammadiyah's position regarding Indonesia's political situation?

Muhammadiyah is considered less strict in its political attitudes, a perception that is motivated by its responses to Indonesia's current political conditions. Problems have included, as stated by M. Busro Muqodas:

- The Indonesian government's cooperation with China, as shown by several Chinese investments and news about Chinese foreign workers.
- The relationship between the government and Shia, including Iran
- Indonesia's lack of concern for the bombing of Aleppo and the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar
- Issues with minority and arrogance power, with senior politicians being perceived as arrogant and as spreading rumor in the mass media and on social media.
- Conflict within the *ummah*, including between Muhammadiyah/NU and MUI/ FPI.
- Disappointment with uncontrolled price increases, tax increases, and electricity bills.

This study also finds that Muhammadiyah elites hope the organization can improve its leadership and urge the government to take a firmer stance. Some think that Muhammadiyah needs to adjust its political stance, to incorporate resistance and seize existing opportunities. Muhammadiyah's Institute of Hikmah and Public Policy (Lembaga Hikmah dan Kebijakan Publik) has an essential role in uniting followers behind existing political attitudes, and as such cannot remain silent on political matters.

The following quote illustrates how Muhammadiyah's political stance as an organization sometimes differs significantly from those of its members. Members seem to expect the organization's leaders to be assertive, while leaders have held that Muhammadiyah may not become involved in practical politics. As stated by the General Secretary of Muhammadiyah's Central Leadership:

All this time, the Muhammadiyah Central Leadership has repeatedly stated that Muhammadiyah does not practice (party) politics, but does

politics nationally.<sup>35</sup>

This has happened since the leadership of Ahmad Syafii Maarif in 2000–2005, which coincided with the 2004 Presidential Election. At the time, Amien Rais, the former Chairman of Muhammadiyah, ran for president. The central leadership did not officially support Amien Rais. Rather, Muhammadiyah prioritized national politics and humanity.<sup>36</sup>

Such firmness is key to Muhammadiyah's political stance. Even though it may not practice politics, Muhammadiyah is able to critique the government<sup>37</sup> without being dragged into practical politics (even as members are involved in such "low" politics). Previous efforts to get Muhammadiyah institutionally involved in practical politics were unsuccessful (as reflected in its official political stance).<sup>38</sup>

Differences in the political perceptions of Muhammadiyah members and leaders have resulted in a "tug-of-war" during Indonesia's four presidential elections since the fall of the New Order regime (i.e. in 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019). Muhammadiyah seems to have asserted political resistance, thereby affecting the organization's political direction. The Chairman of Muhammadiyah, Busyro Muqodas, stated that Muhammadiyah will remain critical of the government, especially in politics.

Muhammadiyah, as a massive Islamic organization, has never been afraid of the state government. It is not rebelling, because Muhammadiyah believes that criticism and cooperation with the State/Government are both necessary for national progress.<sup>39</sup>

### E. Positioning of the *Ummah* Leadership

As a major Islamic organization, Muhammadiyah certainly hopes to play a major role in national development and progress. Muhammadiyah

<sup>35</sup> Abdul Mukti, interview 6 (18 Mar 2019).

<sup>36</sup> Ahmad Syafii Maarif, *Islam dalam Bingkai Keindonesiaan dan Kemanusiaan: Sebuah Refleksi Sejarah* (Bandung: Mizan & Maarif Institute, 2009), pp. 177–80.

<sup>37</sup> Haedar Nashir, *Ideologi Gerakan Muhammadiyah* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2001), pp. 35–6.

<sup>38</sup> Nashir, *Muhammadiyah Gerakan Pembaruan*, pp. 225–7.

<sup>39</sup> M. Busyro Muqodas, interview (20 Mar 2019).

shapes society through its socio-religious and educational activities, including the creation of hospitals and orphanages. However, Muslims—even members—are still questioning Muhammadiyah's representation of Muslims. Muslims often see Muhammadiyah as not present on the political stage, and as slow to respond to the emerging problems of Muslims. It is possible that Muhammadiyah members and other Muslims do not understand Muhammadiyah's political activities or observe said activities directly. Muslims and Muhammadiyah members seem to hope that, rather than high politics, Muhammadiyah should actively practice low politics.

If Muhammadiyah fails to actively respond to the problems of the Indonesian people, members will be unable to understand its political struggles. Muhammadiyah needs to provide an example to Indonesia's significant Muslim population—who comprise 87,2 % of Indonesia's 254 million residents.<sup>40</sup> To do so, it must also strengthen its bonds with other Islamic organizations that share Muhammadiyah's vision. Some Muhammadiyah members argue that, in the current situation, Muhammadiyah needs to mainstream its leadership activities. It should “go with the flow”, have an explicit political stance, and be independent of other organizations; in other words, it should choose a practical political path.

The public has lost its interest in political parties because of their identification with corruption and money politics. As such, Muhammadiyah needs to work together with NU to strengthen its political attitudes. It must have cadres—not leaders—who can maneuver themselves politically while still showing integrity.

We have found arguments that Muhammadiyah's political stance must be firm. When it does not become involved in politics, other organizations will take advantage. As such, Muhammadiyah must urge its cadres to step forward and thereby abandon its stance of neutrality. Politics is full of risks; however, Muhammadiyah must be involved in less risky politics.

Din Syamsuddin's statement below shows the firmness of Muhammadiyah's political stance within the context of Muslims' political

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<sup>40</sup> “Agama”, *Indonesia.go.id*, <https://www.indonesia.go.id/profil/agama>, accessed 17 May 2019.



revival:

Muhammadiyah may not be neutral in Indonesian politics. Muhammadiyah must make a stance. We members of Muhammadiyah have long been a part of Indonesian politics, even if we don't form political parties. Politics does not have to mean political parties, or at least contributions to political parties. We must not be silent in politics. Politics is not neutral. We must take a side.<sup>41</sup>

Syamsuddin's statement above implies that Muhammadiyah should not only simply wait for the government. Even though it is not a political party, Muhammadiyah must be active in national and party politics. Indeed, Muhammadiyah has long been involved in national politics, and as such it cannot be identified as apolitical. Syamsuddin, a former politician with the Golongan Karya Party, seems to have taken a different political stance than the Muhammadiyah Central Leadership, who have avoided bringing Muhammadiyah into practical politics.

The issue of national and regional leadership must also be formulated based on *fikih siyasah*, as adapted to local conditions. For example, in Denpasar, Bali, Muhammadiyah could not make its choice based on religious identity, as most locals are Hindu. This does not mean that Muhammadiyah avoided becoming involved in politics. Politics means risk, and thus Muhammadiyah must take risks.

Political developments in Indonesia since 1999 showed that Muhammadiyah members had used the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, PAN) as a vehicle for their political activities. Although members had the freedom to support other political parties, until 2014 Muhammadiyah members only gained executive power through PAN. Muhammadiyah members thus used PAN as a vehicle for their aspirations.<sup>42</sup>

Muhammadiyah members, especially those involved in PAN, thus required clarity about the organization's political stance. This is especially true in the lead-up to general and regional elections throughout Indonesia, when Muhammadiyah members had difficulty entering parliament as

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<sup>41</sup> Din Syamsuddin, interview (17 Mar 2019).

<sup>42</sup> Rosyida Prihandini, 'Relasi Partai Amanat Nasional dengan Muhammadiyah di dalam Struktur DPD PAN Surabaya Periode 2010-2015', *Jurnal Politik Muda*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2014), pp. 357–68.

their political activities were not formally supported. Muhammadiyah's neutrality meant that it remained distant from political parties and forbade its leaders and administrators from becoming involved in practical political positions; such a stance could not readily be accepted by politicians involved in the organization.

Members hoped that the Muhammadiyah would not prohibit them from becoming involved in practical politics. This was particularly difficult for the organization's leaders, who were required to remain neutral and thus avoided politics. It was hoped that, by allowing members to become active in practical politics, the organization could communicate politically with members in parliament (if elected).

Did this mean that Muhammadiyah must allow its members, and even its leaders, to become politicians? If so, would this cause difficulties for Muhammadiyah at the regional level? Of course, this issue received serious attention from Muhammadiyah's leaders at the national and regional levels.

Muhammadiyah's Chief Secretary in West Java, who expressed hope that the organization would be involved in practical politics, stated:

It is better for Muhammadiyah's Central Leaders to free leaders at the regional (provincial/regency) level to do politics. This would benefit Muhammadiyah. If Muhammadiyah's Central Leaders prohibit their cadres from practicing politics, it would be challenging to get them into political parties.<sup>43</sup>

However, these desires have not received the official support of Muhammadiyah's Central Leadership. The organization has avoided formally approving members' political involvement. Muhammadiyah has remained distant from political parties, but it has not prohibited cadres from practicing politics. Muhammadiyah's Central Leadership only prohibits its leaders at the regional leaders from becoming party leaders.

Muhammadiyah's attempt to keep a distance from all political parties, and to avoid explicitly providing political support to candidates, suggests that it fears risks. Conversely, this political neutrality could adversely affect the political attitudes of successful candidates and inform their selection of cabinet members.

The idea of Muhammadiyah's charitable political efforts (*amal*

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<sup>43</sup> M. Rizal Fadillah, interview (18 Mar 2019).

*usaba politik*) needs serious attention from the organization's leadership. Syamsuddin's idea of Muhammadiyah members and activists becoming involved in practical politics, such as by joining political parties or becoming members of parliament, is positive; this is not the freedom to become a PAN politician, but rather to join any party. Such allocative politics were suggested by Din Syamsuddin ten years ago, even before he became the Chairman of Muhammadiyah's Central Leadership.

In this regard, Muhammadiyah politicians recommend that the organization do the following: (1) improve political education; (2) encourage young people to become active in General Elections Commission, political parties, etc.; (3) practice allocative politics; (4) be active in legal, political, economic, religious, and educational activities. The Muhammadiyah Youth Leader of West Java stated that:

We can't just be quiet. We must encourage potential Muhammadiyah members to become politicians, not prohibit it, and the struggle must be real. Politics cannot always be good and fair to everyone. If Muhammadiyah continues to be that way, politicians will leave Muhammadiyah.<sup>44</sup>

## F. The Resurrection of Islamic Politics?

The 2019 General Election left many questions unanswered for Muslims and for Muhammadiyah. Is it true that there has been a political revival of Muslims? Is it true that Muslims' political pendulum has swung from the high politics of Muhammadiyah to the low or "real" politics of Islamic organizations such as FPI, MUI, and GNPF? Muhammadiyah has also faced serious questions as a large Islamic organization that has a progressive mission of *wasathiyah* (moderation).<sup>45</sup>

In the 1980s, the New Order government under President Soeharto had implemented a single principle policy, whereby political parties and religious organizations had to recognize Pancasila as their sole founding principle. Any socio-political or faith-based organizations that failed to recognize Pancasila were closed or labelled subversive, being branded as rejecting the state's single national principle. Muhammadiyah and NU also took Pancasila as their organizational principle, even though they retained

<sup>44</sup> Iu Rusliana, interview (18 Mar 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Amirrahman, Nubowo, and Khoirudin (eds.), *Islam Berkemajuan untuk Peradaban Dunia: Refleksi dan Agenda Muhammadiyah ke Depan*.

Islam as their theological foundation. KH AR. Fachruddin, a cultural leader from Muhammadiyah, identified Muhammadiyah's acceptance of Pancasila as a sort of "helmet diplomacy". As the helmet protects the rider's head, so too did Muhammadiyah's acceptance of Pancasila as its sole organizational principle prevented the organization from being branded an enemy of the authoritarian and repressive state.<sup>46</sup>

As a cultural movement, Muhammadiyah has operated schools, hospitals, orphanages, and various economic institutions. It has also constructed hundreds of mosques and educated thousands of Islamic scholars. This has been part of what Hefner describes as the booming of new santri among middle-class Muslims. Between 1979 and 1990, the number of State Islamic Institute (IAIN) students across Indonesia increased fourfold, from 28,000 to 100,000. In 1991, some 14% of high school graduates attended one of Indonesia's 14 IAINs. Likewise, the number of mosques increased drastically, from 15,374 in 1973 to 17,750 in 1979, 20,648 in 1984, and 25,655 in 1990; of these, Muhammadiyah owned 6,118. Meanwhile, NU was operating more than 30,000 Islamic boarding schools by 2014; every year, 100 new boarding schools open in Indonesia.<sup>47</sup>

Such cultural developments have not, however, been as prominent in politics. Muslims in Indonesia have suffered politically for much of the country's history. In the 1955 elections, Islamic politicians—represented by the Masjumi and NU parties—received a significant percentage of votes. As such, Muslims enjoyed extensive political space. However, following the rise of the New Order in the 1960s, Muslims' did not enjoy such political space. Indeed, some observers said that Muslims experienced marginalization in the public sphere.<sup>48</sup>

Only in the 1990s, following the establishment of various facilities for Muslims, did Muslims begin to enjoy access to vast political space under Soeharto. Muslims were facilitated with the establishment of the

<sup>46</sup> Imron Nasri (ed.), *Meremajakan Pimpinan Muhammadiyah* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2010), pp. 12–3.

<sup>47</sup> Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi tentang Pandangan Hidup Kyai* (Jakarta: Lembaga Penelitian, Pendidikan, dan Penerangan Ekonomi dan Sosial, 1982), p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> Muhammad Rusli Karim, *Negara dan Peminggiran Islam Politik* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana Yogya, 1999), pp. 217–9.

Muamalat Bank (1989), the acceptance of hijab in public schools and government offices, and the recitation of the Qur'an at government offices. The Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals was formed in December 1990, and Suharto's family went on the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca that same year. Bahtiar Effendi described this phenomenon as an accommodative political success for Muslims, who were no longer trapped in a confrontational and violent relationship with the government. The government changed its political attitude, giving Muslims more space for political activities that accommodated and supported its policies.<sup>49</sup>

In the early 1990s, people were familiar with the term 'political flow' (*aliran politik*). Many political parties and groups were created, supporting extent parties such as PPP (established in the 1970s). Is it true that the national political pendulum has swung from non-flow politics to second-volume flow politics? Furthermore, is it true that there has been a shift in Muslims' political orientation from Muhammadiyah and NU to non-mainstream groups such as FPI and HTI? If so, what exactly must be done by Muhammadiyah as it carries the banner of *Islam rahmatan lil alamin*?

Since the 1990s, there has been a significant shift in the political regime's attitude towards Muslims. While the state did implement a single principle policy in 1984, this was accepted by Indonesian Muslims at Muhammadiyah and NU. Now, Muslims have the opportunity to join the bureaucracy, army, police, and finance sector. No longer are they like 'ringwormed cats'—to borrow a term from Mohammad Natsir, one of Indonesia's prime ministers under President Soekarno and the former chairman of Masjumi.<sup>50</sup>

In the 2019 General Election, as new and mature Islamic groups intersected, there appeared to be a resurgence of political Islam that resulted in sectarianism. Does this represent a substantial change in Islamic politics? Does it signal the rise of political Islam? Is it true that this type of political Islam is shifting from values of diversity, equality, and Islamic modernism to something more radical, fundamentalist, or

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<sup>49</sup> Agus Riyanto, "Islam dan Negara: Metamorfosa Pemikiran Politik Islam Indonesia", *Spektrum*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2004), pp. 178–199.

<sup>50</sup> Afan Gaffar, *Politik Indonesia: Transisi menuju Demokrasi* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1999).

artificial? Or, is the reverse happening?<sup>51</sup>

### G. Concluding Remarks

The findings of this article suggest that Muhammadiyah will remain an essential part of Indonesian politics as long as it can play its role strategically and responsively. Many hope that Muhammadiyah, rather than groups such as FPI, GNPF MUI, HTI, and MMI, will be a motor of Muslim political and cultural activities. The organization remains seen as a cornerstone of moderate and progressive Islam, as a means of spreading a specific message rather than as a political party.

In the 2019 General Election, Muhammadiyah did not officially support any presidential candidate or specific political party. It chose this “middle way” even as some Muhammadiyah activists actively campaigned for certain candidates or even ran for office themselves in the government. Muhammadiyah has remained a non-partisan organization, an influential force in society. Muhammadiyah only needs to redefine its role in politics and be responsive to the nation's problems.

Many political actors need a means of channeling their political aspirations, and members of Muhammadiyah have found themselves divided. A small minority wish that Muhammadiyah had become directly involved in the 2019 elections; a majority of members, however, do not desire this. Opponents to active political participation argue that Muhammadiyah should remain a cultural entity, and that can use cultural means to promote national integrity.

Indonesia's Muslims need political clarity, particularly given that some believe that Joko Widodo's leadership is weak and unauthoritative. As an Islamic organization, Muhammadiyah should remain active, offering a counterweight to the political power, networks, and activities of other countries.

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<sup>51</sup> Edward Aspinall and Ward Berenschot, *Democracy for Sale: Elections, Clientelism, and the State in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

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