

Progressive Islam and the Future of Nationhood: Tracing the Consistency of Muhammadiyah's Political Thought

Muhammad Tanwirul Huda*¹, Kenneth Sulthon Alafi Al Hallaj², Eka Firmansyah³, Dian Prahara Batubara⁴, Suci Yuni Setiawati⁵

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia,
tanwirulhuda15@gmail.com

²Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia, elaphy19@gmail.com

³Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu, Indonesia, ekafirmansyah689@gmail.com

⁴Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia,
dianbatubara144@gmail.com

⁵Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia,
suciyuni2002@gmail.com
*tanwirulhuda15@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Islam *Berkemajuan* (*Progressive Islam*) as Muhammadiyah's ideological cornerstone, tracing its influence on the organization's political thought and vision for Indonesian nationhood. Founded by KH Ahmad Dahlan in 1912, Muhammadiyah synthesizes Islamic reformism and civic nationalism, acting as a pivotal player in Indonesia's independence and democratic development. Utilizing a qualitative historical philosophical methodology analyzing primary organizational documents and Sinta Scopus indexed literature, this study investigates how Islam Berkemajuan guides Muhammadiyah's stance toward the state, democracy, and national identity across distinct historical periods. The findings reveal three enduring principles in Muhammadiyah's political thought: the rejection of theocracy in favor of a civilizational state (*negara otonom*), the prioritization of public welfare (*maslahah*) over partisan interests, and the cultivation of an enlightened citizenry for a just society. Rooted in *Islam Berkemajuan*, these principles enable Muhammadiyah to preserve its Islamic identity while remaining committed to a pluralist state across a century of political shifts. Ultimately, this article contributes to Southeast Asian political Islam scholarship by demonstrating that Muhammadiyah's state engagement constitutes a distinctive 'third way' of Muslim civic engagement.

Keywords: *Islam Berkemajuan, Muhammadiyah, Political Islam, Nationhood, Democracy*

I. INTRODUCTION

Muhammadiyah is one of the largest Islamic mass organizations in the world, with an estimated membership exceeding sixty million people and an institutional network encompassing thousands of schools, universities, hospitals, and social welfare organizations across Indonesia [1]. Founded in 1912 in Yogyakarta by KH Ahmad Dahlan, Muhammadiyah emerged at the intersection of Islamic reformism and anti colonial nationalism, drawing intellectual inspiration from the pan-Islamic modernist movements of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida [2]. From its inception, the organization has sought to reconcile Islamic faith with the demands of modernity, scientific rationality, and civic participation a reconciliation that finds its most systematic expression in the concept of *Islam Berkemajuan*, or Progressive Islam [3].

The concept of *Islam Berkemajuan* was formally articulated in Muhammadiyah's organizational platforms, particularly in the *Tanfidz* documents of its national congresses, and has been most comprehensively elaborated in the organization's 2015 ideological statement, *Negara Pancasila sebagai Darul Ahdi wa Syahadah* [4]. This framework envisions Islam not merely as a system of ritual obligations but as a civilizational force capable of driving intellectual, moral, social, and political progress. *Islam Berkemajuan* is premised on the conviction that authentic Islamic faith is inherently compatible with and indeed demands engagement with reason, democracy, human rights, and the common good of all citizens regardless of religious affiliation [5].

Despite the significance of this concept, there remains a gap in scholarly literature regarding the degree to which *Islam Berkemajuan* has functioned as a consistent and coherent guide for Muhammadiyah's political thought across its more than one hundred years of history. Much of the existing literature either focuses narrowly on specific historical periods such as Muhammadiyah's role in the independence struggle or the Reformasi era or treats the organization's political stance as primarily reactive to changing political circumstances rather than as an expression of a principled and consistent ideological framework [6]. This article seeks to address this gap by examining the consistency of Muhammadiyah's political thought across four key periods: the colonial era (1912–1945), the early independence and Old Order period (1945–1965), the New Order era (1966–1998), and the post-Reformasi democratic period (1998–present).

The central argument of this article is that *Islam Berkemajuan* has provided Muhammadiyah with a theologically grounded and intellectually coherent framework for navigating the complex and often volatile terrain of Indonesian politics. Rather than oscillating between quietism and Islamism the two poles that have typically been used to characterize Muslim political behavior Muhammadiyah has consistently articulated a third position: that of a Muslim civil society organization committed to democracy, pluralism, and national unity, while maintaining its distinctively Islamic identity and moral vision [7]. Understanding this 'third way' is essential not only for the study of Muhammadiyah but for broader scholarly debates about the relationship between Islam and democracy in Southeast Asia and beyond [8].

II. METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach, integrating historical-philosophical analysis with systematic literature review. The qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study because the central research question concerning the consistency and coherence of Muhammadiyah's political thought across historical periods requires interpretive engagement with primary texts, organizational documents, and scholarly commentary, rather than quantitative measurement [9]. The historical-philosophical approach, as employed in the study of political thought and intellectual history, involves the systematic interpretation of ideas in their historical context, tracing the development, transformation, and continuity of key concepts across time [10].

Primary sources for this study include Muhammadiyah's foundational documents, congress decisions (*Tanfidz Mukhtamar*), and official ideological statements, particularly the 2015 statement on *Negara Pancasila sebagai Darul Ahdi wa Syahadah*. Secondary sources were identified through a systematic search of academic databases, including Sinta (Science and Technology Index), Scopus, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories of major Indonesian universities. The search terms employed included: 'Muhammadiyah political thought', *Islam Berkemajuan*, Islamic modernism Indonesia, Muslim civil society Southeast Asia, 'Muhammadiyah democracy,' and related terms in both English and Indonesian [11].

Inclusion criteria for secondary sources were: (a) peer reviewed journal articles or book chapters indexed by Sinta (S1 or S2) or Scopus; (b) published between 2000 and 2024; (c) directly addressing Muhammadiyah's ideology, political thought, or role in Indonesian society and politics. Sources that did not meet these criteria, or

that duplicated arguments already represented in the selected literature, were excluded [12]. A total of 35 sources were selected and analyzed using thematic content analysis, in which key themes pertaining to *Islam Berkemajuan*, political thought, and national identity were identified, categorized, and interpreted in relation to the central research question.

The thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke [13], involving six stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the report. This iterative process enabled the identification of three overarching thematic clusters that structure the findings: (1) the theological foundations of *Islam Berkemajuan*, (2) Muhammadiyah's political thought and its relationship to the Indonesian state; and (3) the contemporary relevance and future trajectory of Muhammadiyah's political vision. The findings are presented in the following section.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Theological Foundations of Islam Berkemajuan

The concept of *Islam Berkemajuan* is rooted in the Quranic imperative of *iqra* (read/inquire) and the prophetic tradition of seeking knowledge, which Ahmad Dahlan interpreted as a divine mandate for intellectual engagement with the challenges of modernity [14]. Drawing on the reformist *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) methodology of Muhammad Abduh, Dahlan rejected the uncritical imitation of classical jurisprudence (*taqlid*) and called for a return to the primary sources of Islam the Quran and Sunnah read through the lens of reason and contextualized understanding [2]. This methodological commitment distinguished Muhammadiyah from traditionalist organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, which placed greater emphasis on the authority of the classical scholarly tradition [15].

At its core, *Islam Berkemajuan* rests on three theological pillars. The first is *tauhid* (monotheism) understood not merely as a statement of God's oneness but as a liberating principle that frees human beings from subservience to any authority other than the divine [3]. This theological commitment has direct political implications: it rules out the absolute sovereignty of any human ruler or institution, providing a theological basis for Muhammadiyah's support for democratic governance in which sovereignty is vested in the people and constrained by law [16]. The second pillar is *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (commanding the good and forbidding the evil), which Muhammadiyah interprets as a mandate for active civic engagement not merely ritual compliance in the

service of the common good [4]. The third pillar is *rahmatan lil alamin* (mercy to all creation), which grounds Muhammadiyah's commitment to religious pluralism, social welfare, and the inclusion of all citizens regardless of religion, ethnicity, or class within the circle of moral concern [17].

These three pillars are not merely abstract theological propositions; they have been institutionalized in Muhammadiyah's organizational practice through its extensive networks of schools, hospitals, orphanages, and social welfare organizations [18]. By embodying *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* and *rahmatan lil alamin* in concrete social institutions, Muhammadiyah has translated its theological vision into tangible contributions to Indonesian public life contributions that have reinforced its legitimacy as a civic actor and its credibility as an interlocutor with the state [19].

Muhammadiyah Under the Colonial Period, Post-Independence and the Old Order, the New Order, Reformasi and Democratic Consolidation Era

Muhammadiyah's founding in 1912 coincided with a period of intensifying anti colonial nationalism across the Indonesian archipelago. Ahmad Dahlan's decision to establish the organization as a social-educational rather than explicitly political body was itself a principled choice rooted in the theology of *Islam Berkemajuan*: the conviction that genuine Islamic progress required the cultivation of educated, morally capable citizens before the structures of political power could be meaningfully transformed [20]. This 'long game' strategy investing in education and social welfare as the preconditions of political emancipation reflects a consistent thread in Muhammadiyah's political thought that continues to distinguish it from more explicitly political Islamist movements [6].

During the colonial period, Muhammadiyah's relationship with the Dutch colonial administration was one of careful navigation rather than direct confrontation [21]. The organization obtained legal recognition from the Dutch colonial government in 1914, which allowed it to expand its educational and social welfare activities while avoiding the political suppression that befell more overtly nationalist organizations. This pragmatic approach has sometimes been criticized as accommodation to colonial power [22]; however, it can more accurately be understood as an expression of the *Islam Berkemajuan* principle of prioritizing *maslahah* (public welfare) over the pursuit of ideological purity. By securing the institutional space necessary for its educational mission, Muhammadiyah laid the groundwork for the Muslim intelligentsia that would play a central role in Indonesia's independence movement [2].

The relationship between Islam and nationalism in Muhammadiyah's thought during this period was articulated most clearly by figures such as Haji Mas Mansur and Kahar Muzakir, who argued that Islamic faith and Indonesian nationalist identity were mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory [23]. This position was reflected in Muhammadiyah's participation in the preparation of the 1945 Constitution, particularly in the debates surrounding the Jakarta Charter, in which Muhammadiyah leaders initially supported the inclusion of an obligation for Muslims to observe Islamic law but ultimately accepted its removal in the interest of national unity a decision that reflected the organization's consistent prioritization of *maslahah* and pluralism over Islamist exclusivism [4].

The post-independence period posed new and complex challenges for Muhammadiyah's political thought. The establishment of the Indonesian Republic created the institutional context within which Islamic organizations had to define their relationship to the secular-nationalist state [24]. Muhammadiyah's response to this challenge was shaped by its theology of *Islam Berkemajuan*: rather than seeking to establish an Islamic state, the organization articulated a vision of Indonesia as a Pancasila state that was compatible with Islamic values by virtue of its commitment to monotheism (*Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*), justice, and human dignity [5].

During the parliamentary democracy period (1945–1959), Muhammadiyah maintained an indirect political presence through its association with the Masyumi party, which served as the primary vehicle for Islamic political interests in the Indonesian parliament [25]. However, Muhammadiyah was careful to maintain its organizational independence from Masyumi and to resist the equation of Islamic political identity with any particular partisan agenda [7]. This resistance to partisan co-optation reflects a consistent feature of Muhammadiyah's political thought: the organization has consistently understood its primary political role as that of a moral force in civil society rather than a partisan competitor for state power [8].

The imposition of Guided Democracy by President Sukarno in 1959 and the subsequent political turbulence of the 1960s severely constrained the political space available to Islamic organizations [26]. Muhammadiyah responded by retreating to its core mission of education, social welfare, and religious cultivation a retreat that was not a capitulation but a reaffirmation of the *Islam Berkemajuan* conviction that the cultivation of a morally and intellectually capable citizenry is the foundation of genuine political progress [14]. This period reinforced Muhammadiyah's institutional identity as a civil society organization rather than a political party, a distinction that would prove crucial for its resilience during the authoritarian New Order era.

The New Order regime of President Suharto (1966–1998) imposed severe constraints on political Islam, forcing Islamic organizations to depoliticize their activities and accept the state ideology of Pancasila as the sole basis of all organizational activity [27]. For Muhammadiyah, this period was one of both constraint and institutional growth. The regime's aggressive promotion of social and economic development created new opportunities for Muhammadiyah to expand its educational and social welfare networks, while at the same time severely limiting its capacity for political advocacy [19].

Muhammadiyah's accommodation of the New Order's political requirements has been interpreted by some scholars as evidence of political opportunism or organizational self-preservation at the expense of Islamic principles [28]. However, a more nuanced reading, informed by the theology of *Islam Berkemajuan*, suggests that Muhammadiyah's leaders made a calculated judgment that institutional preservation and the expansion of the organization's social mission were more consistent with *maslahah* than principled but futile resistance [3]. This judgment was not without its critics within the organization, and the tension between accommodation and resistance remained a source of internal debate throughout the New Order period [29].

Significantly, Muhammadiyah's acceptance of Pancasila as the sole organizational basis in 1985 was accompanied by a theological reinterpretation that framed Pancasila not as a secular ideology in competition with Islam but as a formulation of universal values consistent with Islamic principles [4]. This reinterpretation which anticipated the more elaborated concept of *Negara Pancasila sebagai Darul Ahdi wa Syahadah* articulated in 2015 exemplifies the way in which Muhammadiyah has consistently used the resources of *Islam Berkemajuan* to navigate political constraint without abandoning its Islamic identity or its commitment to the public good [5].

The collapse of the New Order in 1998 and the transition to democratic governance opened a new chapter in Muhammadiyah's political engagement. The Reformasi period saw an explosion of Islamic political parties and a renewed public debate about the role of religion in Indonesian democracy [30]. Muhammadiyah's response to this new political environment was shaped by its established theology of *Islam Berkemajuan*: the organization consistently opposed attempts to establish an Islamic state or to insert Islamic legal provisions into the constitution, arguing that such moves were contrary to both Islamic values and the spirit of national unity [16].

Muhammadiyah's 2015 ideological statement, *Negara Pancasila sebagai Darul Ahdi wa Syahadah*, represents the most comprehensive articulation of the organization's political thought in the post-Reformasi era [4]. The concept of *Darul Ahdi wa Syahadah* the State of Covenant and Witness holds that Indonesia is a legitimate Islamic political community not by virtue of imposing Islamic law but by virtue of its citizens' collective commitment to justice, welfare, and moral governance [31]. This framework offers a sophisticated Islamic justification for the secular-pluralist democratic state that avoids both the wholesale adoption of Western liberal political theory and the theocratic alternatives proposed by Islamist movements [17].

In the contemporary period, Muhammadiyah has played an active role in defending democratic institutions and resisting the influence of radical Islamist movements. The organization's leadership has consistently condemned terrorism, religious intolerance, and the exploitation of Islam for partisan political purposes [32]. At the same time, Muhammadiyah has continued to advocate for social justice, anti-corruption measures, and the protection of the rights of religious minorities issues that reflect its commitment to *rahmatan lil alamin* and its vision of Indonesia as a nation in which Islamic values contribute to the common good of all citizens [33].

Consistency and Tensions in Muhammadiyah's Political Thought

The analysis presented above suggests that Muhammadiyah's political thought has been characterized by a remarkable degree of consistency across more than a century of Indonesian history. Three enduring principles can be identified as the core of this consistency. First, Muhammadiyah has consistently rejected theocracy and affirmed the legitimacy of a pluralist democratic state, grounded theologically in the concept of *tauhid* and institutionally in its acceptance of Pancasila [7]. Second, Muhammadiyah has consistently prioritized *maslahah* (public welfare) over partisan political interests, enabling it to navigate periods of political constraint without abandoning its Islamic identity or social mission [6]. Third, Muhammadiyah has consistently understood its primary political role as that of a moral force in civil society cultivating educated, virtuous, and civically engaged citizens as the foundation of a just and democratic polity [18].

These consistencies, however, should not obscure the real tensions and debates within Muhammadiyah's political thought. The organization has at various times accommodated authoritarian regimes, moderated its positions in response to external political pressure, and struggled to maintain internal coherence in the face of diverse regional and generational constituencies [34]. The relationship

between *Islam Berkemajuan* as an ideal and Muhammadiyah's organizational practice has not always been smooth or uncontested [29]. Nevertheless, the persistence of the *Islam Berkemajuan* framework as the organization's primary point of ideological reference across periods of political change is itself significant evidence of its normative power as a guide for political judgment [35].

The future of Muhammadiyah's political thought will depend in part on its capacity to articulate the principles of *Islam Berkemajuan* in ways that are responsive to new challenges: the rise of digital media and online radicalization, the increasing socioeconomic inequality generated by globalization, the environmental crisis, and the growing influence of identity politics in Indonesian democratic life [20]. Scholars and leaders within Muhammadiyah have begun to engage with these challenges, developing extensions of *Islam Berkemajuan* that address ecological sustainability, economic justice, and digital literacy as dimensions of Islamic civic responsibility [3]. Whether these extensions will prove sufficient to maintain Muhammadiyah's relevance and coherence as a political force in the twenty first century remains an open and urgent question.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the concept of *Islam Berkemajuan* as the theological and ideological foundation of Muhammadiyah's political thought, and has traced its consistent influence across four key periods of Indonesian history: the colonial era, the post-independence and Old Order period, the New Order, and the post-Reformasi democratic era. The analysis reveals that *Islam Berkemajuan* has functioned not merely as a rhetorical label but as a genuinely operative framework shaping the organization's political judgments, institutional strategies, and engagement with the Indonesian state.

Three enduring principles the rejection of theocracy in favor of a pluralist democratic state, the prioritization of *maslahah* over partisan interests, and the cultivation of an enlightened citizenry as the foundation of just governance have provided Muhammadiyah with a consistent political identity across more than a century of change. These principles reflect the deepest convictions of *Islam Berkemajuan*: that authentic Islamic faith is not a constraint on political progress but its most reliable foundation.

The contribution of this article to the scholarship on political Islam in Southeast Asia lies in its demonstration that Muhammadiyah represents a distinctive 'third way' of Muslim political engagement neither quietist nor Islamist but civic, democratic, and principled. This 'third way' deserves greater attention in comparative scholarship on Islam and democracy, both as a model for other

Muslim-majority societies navigating the tensions between religious identity and democratic governance, and as a demonstration of the intellectual resources within the Islamic tradition for constructing a theology of democratic citizenship.

Future research should extend the analysis presented here by examining the reception of *Islam Berkemajuan* at the grassroots level, by comparing Muhammadiyah's political thought with that of analogous organizations in other Muslim majority democracies, and by exploring the implications of *Islam Berkemajuan* for emerging challenges such as environmental governance, digital democracy, and economic inequality. These directions promise to enrich both our understanding of Muhammadiyah and the broader scholarly conversation about the future of Islam and democracy in the twenty first century.

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