Islamic organizations and electoral politics in Indonesia: the case of Muhammadiyah[1]

Eunsook Jung

Abstract: **What role do Muslim social and educational organizations play in Indonesian politics after democratization? When democratization opens up a larger political space for Islamic organizations to participate in politics, do Muslim organizations emerge as political powers or remain socio-religious organizations? How do Muslim organizations engage in electoral politics? This article addresses these questions by examining the role of Muhammadiyah in democratic Indonesian politics. The author argues that Muhammadiyah's political behaviour is driven by its institutional logic, which places its religious and social duties before its political interests. Although there have been attempts by some elites to take advantage of Muhammadiyah for their own political gains, Muhammadiyah has managed to refrain from building or supporting a particular political party at the organizational level. Moreover, political learning through unsuccessful outcomes in initial elections and bitter experience with PKS also alerted Muhammadiyah to the need to protect itself from partisan politics by emphasizing its organizational principle. This article also demonstrates how religious institutions use politics for religious ends and to confirm the integrity of their community.**

Keywords **political learning; institutional logic; electoral mobilization; partisan politics; modernist Islam; Muhammadiyah**

Author details: Dr Eunsook Jung is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 105 Garfield Avenue, PO Box 4004, Eau Claire, WI 54702-4004, USA. E-mail: junge@uwec.edu.

'*Jangan hidup dari Muhammadiyah, hidupi Muhammadiyah*' [Don't make a living out of Muhammadiyah, make Muhammadiyah alive]: common advice from senior Muhammadiyah leaders to young members.[2]

Religious organizations often form political parties and political parties are often affiliated with religious organizations (see Goldstone, 2003). India's BJP, Catholic political parties in Western Europe, Nadlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia and the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East are all examples. While such alliances and affiliations are common around the world, there are also cases in which religious

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[2] Muhammadiyah (2007), *Profile Muhammadiyah: Muhammadiyah Facing the Global Era*, Muhammadiyah, Jakarta. This quotation indicates that Muhammadiyah as an institution comes first before any individual interests.

organizations remain unaffiliated with political parties. This paper will focus on variations in Muslim organizations' relations with political parties by examining a mass-based Muslim organization in Indonesia.

After Indonesia's democratization in 1998, the Indonesian government lifted legal conditions against many groups, including Islamic organizations, allowing them to participate in politics (King, 2003; Sherlock, 2004). At that time, Muhammadiyah's leader, Amien Rais, and his followers were engaged in building a political party and pushing Muhammadiyah to represent modernist Islam directly in electoral politics. Despite Amien Rais's effort, Muhammadiyah managed to remain a religious and social organization while keeping its distance from political parties. Muhammadiyah's trajectory is different from that of NU, the other mass-based Indonesian Muslim organization, which built its own political party as its political wing at the time of democratization (Bush, 2009; Mietzner, 2008; Jung, 2009). Although NU also ended up employing neutrality later as an approach to political parties, it was more actively engaged in partisan politics than Muhammadiyah (Jung, 2009; Kadir, 2002).

This paper aims to explain the factors that shape the trajectories of Muhammadiyah's political (dis)engagement since Indonesia's democratization. I argue that the constant struggle not to be affiliated with any political party is due to Muhammadiyah's embedded institutional logic of prioritizing its religious and social functions over its political roles. Political learning occurred in repeated interactions with political parties and the state, as well as through electoral failures that enabled Muhammadiyah to reinforce its logic. Moreover, three internal characteristics – a tendency to avoid partisan politics, independent rational investigation and divided elites – made Muhammadiyah reinforce its logic. Not forming a political party was perceived as an efficient way of protecting its religious and social missions as well as its public influence. While personal interest and organizational logic clash with each other at times in decision making, as some elites try to take advantage of Muhammadiyah for their own political gains, reinforcing institutional logic is a pragmatic solution for Muhammadiyah's survival.

This paper will begin by analysing Muhammadiyah's political engagement, focusing on institutional logic and political learning. I will first examine Muhammadiyah's changing trajectories of political behaviour since Indonesia's democratization and discuss how political learning occurred by looking into internal debates within the organization and interaction with political parties. Having done so, I will explain three internal characteristics that constrained Muhammadiyah to reinforce its institutional logic. The findings presented here are primarily based on fieldwork between 2007 and 2010. This paper draws from in-depth interviews with Muhammadiyah board members, rank-and-file members, party elites and cadres at the national as well as regional levels, plus participant observations. All primary documents were gathered at various localities including Jakarta, Central Java, North Sumatra and Yogyakarta.

Theorizing Islamic political activism

What shapes the political behaviour of Islamic organizations? Interest-based explanations help us understand why organizations push for party formation and organizational elites run for elections. Interest-based explanations provide strong

analytical leverage in understanding organizations' political behaviour from an agency-based perspective. This approach highlights the importance of agency, choice and contingency rather than structural determinism. In this tradition, scholars such as Kalyvas (1996), Warner (2000) and Gill (1998) examine the behaviour of religious institutions and argue that organizations prioritize their concerns for market share and survival over ideology in determining their behaviour. They consider religious institutions as firms and explain how institutional religious interests influence politics. Agents make a decision for organizational survival and to maximize their power, given the context.

However, interest-based accounts have limits in explaining what guides Muhammadiyah, a mass-based Muslim organization in Indonesia, in making decisions about its political behaviour when individual interest and organizational interest clash with each other, and when factions within it push for different directions. Muhammadiyah's political activism is not driven by individual interests but by ideational factors such as institutional logic.

This argument is in line with Benedict Anderson's position that we are accustomed to think only of politicians using religion for political ends, and we do not see the possibility of religious people using politics for religious ends (Anderson, 1975, p 22). If we look at politics from a religious perspective, we can understand how religious institutions make political decisions. Religion is not just 'a body of beliefs' but is also 'a community of believers', and religions assert theological ideas and also pursue the integrity of their community (Thomas, 2005, pp 23–24). Through Muhammadiyah, we can see how an Islamic organization uses politics for religious ends. In the Indonesian context, defending their religious communities would mean that Muslim organizations balanced their religious, social and political roles for organizational survival (Alfian, 1989; Anderson, 1975). At the same time, politics should serve organizations' religious and social roles, not the other way around. Although Muhammadiyah might become political at times, the organizational principles within the Muhammadiyah community constrain its elites and rank-and-file members.

Political opportunities and political party building

Indonesia's political environment changed with democratization in the late 1990s. Unlike under the Suharto regime, which controlled and allowed only three political parties, political parties were now able to form freely (King, 2003; Sherlock, 2004). More than 100 political parties registered and 48 political parties were able to compete for the 1999 election (Liddle, 2000; Zenzie, 2004). Muhammadiyah had to consider which direction it should take in a fast changing political environment. With the openness in policies and the resources that Muhammadiyah possessed, building a political party was perceived to be viable and strategic to some Muhammadiyah members. In particular, Muhammadiyah's then leader, Amien Rais, was keen on building a political party. However, Amien Rais was not able to make a decision alone for Muhammadiyah. There are 13 executive board members at the central office who are elected by its members and are involved collectively in decision making. At the same time, all decisions have to be discussed with the nationwide provincial and district Muhammadiyah officers at a yearly national meeting. There were active discussions and debates among various groups about

the political roles Muhammadiyah could play, given the organizational culture that nurtures independent rational investigation (see Eliraz, 2004).

Amien Rais's desire to build and lead a new party was supported by many *Pemuda Muhammadiyah* [Muhammadiyah Young Men's Organization] members, particularly in Yogyakarta and Central Java. These members believed that a political party directly sponsored by Muhammadiyah would be critical in ensuring its organizational interest in Indonesia's new political environment. Given its 30-million-strong membership, they believed that a political party established by Muhammadiyah would be very successful in elections and would be a resource for Muhammadiyah to represent Muslim voices in politics.[3] However, Amien Rais's idea was challenged by many Muhammadiyah members. Those who supported non-engagement in electoral politics emphasized the organizational principle that Muhammadiyah should focus on social and religious activities. They argued that if Muhammadiyah became a political party, its social and religious activities could not be sustained, as they could easily be appropriated by party politics. Instead of being a political party that posed the risk of losing its socio-religious missions, this group believed that Muhammadiyah should find a way of influencing politics by formulating and advocating important policy issues that were relevant to Muhammadiyah's main missions. Although this group recognized the importance of politics in carrying out Muhammadiyah's social activities, it believed that building a political party was not necessary, and partisan engagement might bring more harm than good, based on its historical experiences. Many senior board members of Muhammadiyah saw the perils of partisan politics as many modernist Muslims, especially those associated with the banned Masyumi, were discriminated against by the Suharto regime (Liddle, 2000). In order to avoid unnecessary discrimination, non-partisanship was perceived to be strategic.[4]

After a long deliberation, Muhammadiyah came up with a proposal that sat halfway between two ideas. The collective leadership of Muhammadiyah endorsed Amien Rais's plan to build a political party, but at the same time asked him to step down as Muhammadiyah leader. Muhammadiyah members who supported Amien Rais were free to join the party. Nevertheless, Muhammadiyah did not officially affiliate itself with Amien Rais's party and would still remain a socio-religious organization. Amien Rais stepped down and built *Partai Amanat Nasional* (PAN, the National Mandate Party). His supporters from Muhammadiyah followed him and became active members of PAN. While Muhammadiyah members provided a strong base for building PAN for its initial stage, Muhammadiyah and PAN were not structurally and officially related (Baswedan, 2004; Zenzie, 2004; Liddle, 2000).

This compromise was not the end of the debate about Muhammadiyah's roles in politics. Those who supported PAN strongly argued that Muhammadiyah should

[3] There was another proposal in addition to these two ideas, but it did not work out. For a short while, there were discussions about building a unified moderate Muslim party, with Muhammadiyah joining the existing party PPP (United Development Party). This proposal was not appealing either to Muhammadiyah or to Amien Rais. Apart from the question of whether PPP could become a reform party that represented modernist Muslims collectively, neither Muhammadiyah nor Amien Rais was clear about how much of a leadership role they could play within the party. This proposal vanished before it took off.

[4] The division within Muhammadiyah regarding political party building was reconstructed based on personal interviews with various Muhammadiyah board members, including Rizal Sukma (18 November 2007), Haidar Natsir (15 December 2007), Abdul Munir Mulkan (14 December 2007) and Din Syamsuddin (28 December 2007).

consider PAN as a part of Muhammadiyah's *amal usaha* [religious and social obligations] in the political field and support PAN exclusively, as party patronage was thought to be necessary for Muhammadiyah's maintenance and expansion.[5] This position gained some ground as Muhammadiyah's main competitor, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim organization representing traditionalist Islam, built its own party called *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* (PKB, the National Awakening Party).

Despite the constant attempts by some members to bring Muhammadiyah to the forefront of party politics, Muhammadiyah was not completely subsumed by partisan politics. Furthermore, after experiencing both the national legislative election and the presidential election in 2004, Muhammadiyah went through a process of political learning due to its failures in mobilizing people for votes. By realizing its limited mobilization capacity Muhammadiyah was even more committed to its principle as a socio-religious organization.

Political learning: Muhammadiyah and electoral politics in the *reformasi* years

Political learning took place in the organization through various interactions with political parties and also through electoral competition. Although Muhammadiyah promised to remain a socio-religious organization, the temptation of political power did not completely disappear. It tested the waters of political involvement during the *reformasi* years. However, its marginalization within PAN and the electoral failure of Amien Rais offered political learning that led to the alteration of Muhammadiyah's political views and strategies.

Initially, the informal relationship between Muhammadiyah and PAN seemed to be beneficial to both of them. As Muhammadiyah members were a big component of PAN, PAN prioritized them on the party list since Muhammadiyah had a mass base.[6] Moreover, PAN took advantage of Muhammadiyah's extensive network around the nation for its first election. However, after the 1999 election, the relationships began to fail. As shown in Table 1, PAN gained only 7.12% of the vote in the 1999 national legislative election. There is no doubt that Muhammadiyah was critical in building PAN, given Muhammadiyah's networks around the nation, but its mass membership did not guarantee votes for PAN.

After the 1999 election, the informal relationship between Muhammadiyah and PAN started to unravel. The Muhammadiyah faction in PAN was starting to collapse. While in 1999, Muhammadiyah was the biggest faction within PAN, business factions had become dominant by 2004. Moreover, with business factions taking over PAN, Muhammadiyah members within PAN did not make it to the top of the party list for the 2004 election, which reduced the chances of gaining parliamentary seats for Muhammadiyah members.[7] As a result, from 1999 to 2004, the number of members of parliament and PAN central board members with Muhammadiyah backgrounds decreased drastically (Sugiarto, 2006a). By 2005, successful

[5] Personal interview with Rizal Sukma, 18 November 2007.

[6] A closed-list proportional representation system was used in the 1999 election.

[7] The discontented and marginalized Muhammadiyah members within PAN later built a splinter party called *Partai Matahari Bangsa* (PMB, the National Sun Party) for the 2009 election. However, it did not win any seats.

Table 1. The 1999 national legislative election.

Political parties	1999 election	Number of seats
PDI-P (Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle)	33.73%	153
Golkar (New Order Party)	22.43%	120
PKB (National Awakening Party)	12.60%	51
PPP (United Development Party)	10.70%	58
PAN (National Mandate Party)	7.11%	34
PBB (Crescent Star Party)	1.94%	13
PK (Justice Party)	1.36%	7
Others (more than 14 political parties)	10.13%	26
Total	*100%*	*462*

businessmen had taken over the central board leadership. Soetrisno Bachir, a batik entrepreneur from Central Java, became Amien Rais's successor, and another businessman, Zulkifli Hasan, became secretary-general (Sugiarto, 2006b).

In the 2004 national legislative election, PAN secured 6.7% of the national vote. Compared to the 1999 election, its votes went down only by 0.5%. PAN's votes in 2004 declined further in Muhammadiyah strongholds such as West Sumatra, where its vote dropped from 22.2% in 1999 to 14.2% in 2004. Nevertheless, PAN secured enough votes to remain the sixth largest party, despite having fewer candidates with a Muhammadiyah background, and made up for the loss in Muhammadiyah's strongholds. After the 2004 legislative election, the relationship between Muhammadiyah and PAN became even more distant.

Because of Muhammadiyah members' disillusionment with PAN, they seemed to be leaning towards leaving electoral politics. However, Amien Rais ran as PAN's presidential candidate in the 2004 election, revivifying debates as to what role Muhammadiyah should play. Muhammadiyah endorsed Amien Rais as a presidential candidate. Although the then head of Muhammadiyah, Syafii Maarif, defended Muhammadiyah's support for Amien Rais as a 'genuine merit-based decision', Muhammadiyah members were drawn into electoral campaigns for Amien Rais. During this period, the slogan 'Amien Rais Yes, PAN No' was popular, which

Table 2. The 2004 presidential election.

Candidates (President/ Vice-President)	Parties	First round	Second round
Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono Yusuf Kalla	Democratic Party (PD)	36,051,236 (33.58%)	67,196,112 (60.9%)
Megawati Sukarnoputri Hasyim Muzadi	Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P)	28,171,063 (26.24%)	43,198,851 (39.1%)
Wiranto Saluhuddin Wahid	Golkar	23,811,028 (22.18%)	
Amien Rais ***Siswono Yudo Husodo***	***National Mandate Party (PAN)***	***16,035,565*** ***(14.94%)***	
Hamzah Haz Agum Gumelar	United Development Party (PPP)	3,275,011 (3.06%)	
Total		*106,228,247* *(100%)*	*106,228,247* *(100%*

demonstrates that Muhammadiyah's support was solely for its former leader, not for the party he built (Thohari, 2004, p 23). Although Muhammadiyah fully endorsed Amien Rais as the best candidate for the country, Amien Rais was not elected, and only gained 14.94% in the presidential election. Out of five pairs that ran for the presidential election, Amien Rais came in second to last, to Muhammadiyah's disappointment (see Table 2).

Rais's failure in the presidential election increased the awareness of Muhammadiyah's shortcomings, such as its limited mobilizational capacity, confirming that Muhammadiyah was not a political machine that could be used for garnering votes. As I have tried to show, Muhammadiyah's strength lies in its potential for political mobilization, not in its actual capacity for political mobilization. Many raised the concern that being engaged in elections, whether supporting a political party or a particular candidate, could fracture Muhammadiyah due to divisive partisanship, and could also distract Muhammadiyah members from focusing on socio-religious missions. The next section of this paper shows how Muhammadiyah's institutional logic has been buttressed as a result of its political experience.

Neutrality reimposed

In its 2005 *Muktamar* [National Congress][8] in Malang, Muhammadiyah re-emphasized its role as a civil society organization and started to take strict measures against partisan politics. Amien Rais was no longer active in Muhammadiyah after his failure in the presidential election. Muhammadiyah decided that it would prevent any political parties from utilizing both the name and the symbols of Muhammadiyah. Instead, Muhammadiyah prioritized sustaining its organization. As an organization that is even older than the Republic of Indonesia, Muhammadiyah has pride in itself. As a result of political learning through two electoral cycles, Muhammadiyah acknowledged that it needed to return to its religious and social roles. Its religious reforms could not be completed without providing social services to the poor and the needy. Politics comes only in support of its religious and social activities, but not the other way around.

Combating neutrality: the PKS phenomenon

Even after Muhammadiyah had adopted neutrality as a policy, it still had to protect itself actively from party politics. The religious rivalry with PKS alarmed Muhammadiyah, which confirmed its belief that party politics was not beneficial for Muhammadiyah and that its organizational principle had to be strengthened.

PKS and Muhammadiyah share their roots in modernist Islam, although PKS is more radical in its character, supporting the implementation of *sharia*. PKS originated from the *tarbiyah* [Islamic education] movement on university campuses and became a political party at the time of democratization in 1998 (Machmudi, 2008; Noor, 2006; Hasan, 2009); and it was initially called *Partai Keadilan* (PK, the Justice Party). However, due to its electoral failure in 1999, PK changed its

[8] *Muktamar* takes place every five years. During *Muktamar*, Muhammadiyah members discuss their plans and strategies for the next five years, and also elect a new chairman for that period.

name to PKS in 2003. Within a decade, PKS had become the fourth ranked political party (Platzdasch, 2009; Hamayotsu, 2011b).[9] Given their shared roots in modernist Islam, Muhammadiyah and PKS have competed against each other, and Muhammadiyah has been wary of PKS's new *dakwah* movement. As a way of 'community-building' to build mass support, PKS provided social welfare services for the underprivileged population, accompanied by religious indoctrination in moderate fundamentalism (Hamayotsu, 2011a). Muhammadiyah was concerned that PKS was slowly appropriating Muhammadiyah's assets. Dr Munir Mulkan from Muhammadiyah expressed his concern about this in *Suara Muhammadiyah* [*The Voice of Muhammadiyah*], the organization's official magazine (Mulkan, 2006). Mulkan argued that PKS frequently used disasters as opportunities to convert and to create support for the party. Moreover, as Muhammadiyah owns networks of social service institutions, PKS uses clandestine cells to infiltrate Muhammadiyah's institutions – hospitals, universities, schools, mosques, charities and student associations – to recruit new members (Hasan, 2009; Ricklefs, 2008).[10]

As a response to PKS's infiltration, Muhammadiyah issued Central Board Decree Number 149 [*Surat Keputusan*, SK] on organizational consolidation and *amal usaha* [religious and social obligation] in 2006. According to this decree, 'Muhammadiyah has a right to be respected by others, and to be free of all agendas, interference and influence by other parties which may disrupt the unity and progress of its movement (Preamble, Point 4)'. The decree also notes that:

> 'Every Muhammadiyah member needs to be aware, understand and adopt a critical attitude towards all political parties in this nation, including those which claims [*sic*] to be engaged in religious proselytization, or develop proselytization auxiliaries/activities, such as the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), recognizing that they are in fact political parties. Every political party is focused on the acquisition of political power. For that reason, in dealing with any political party, we must always remain committed to the true path of the Muhammadiyah and must free ourselves and never engage ourselves with the mission, interests, activities or goals of the above mentioned political parties.' (Decree, Point 3)[11]

After this decree was released, the leaders of both Muhammadiyah and PKS met and reconciled, agreeing that PKS would respect the boundaries of Muhammadiyah, while Muhammadiyah would not single out PKS for criticism. Through this process, PKS also learned that it should adapt itself to the prevailing norms in Indonesia, while Muhammadiyah emphasized its return to its socio-religious roots.

More and more voices within Muhammadiyah argued that the organization had been wasting too much energy on political debates. Unless it made efforts to protect its *amal usaha*, Muhammadiyah might lose its members, endanger its religious and social activities and would not outlive its current leadership (Setiawan, 2006).[12] Haidar Natsir, a senior figure in Muhammadiyah, said: 'If we let politics enter

[9] PKS ranked fourth in the 2009 election, with about 7.88%, increased from 7.34%. PKS is the Islamist party with the largest share of the vote.

[10] Personal interview with Abdul Munir Mulkan, 14 December 2007.

[11] The English translation of this decree comes from http://www.libforall.org/media/news-stories/expose/Illusion-of-an-Islamic-State-English-Excerpts.pdf (accessed 22 February 2012).

[12] Farid Setiawan is the General Chairman of the Regional Board of Directors of the Muhammadiyah Student Movement in the province of Yogyakarta.

into Muhammadiyah's social activities, there would be nothing left in twenty or thirty years. If Muhammadiyah is destroyed, then, Islamic proselytization fails; it is not good for the country either.'[13]

As an effort to save Muhammadiyah from political debates, its Central Board Decree No 101, issued in July 2007, stated that all Muhammadiyah personnel, including teachers, deans, secretaries and any Muhammadiyah-related organization functionaries, were forbidden to take a position in political parties. Muhammadiyah emphasizes that it is a socio-religious organization, not a political one. After its bitter experience with PKS, Muhammadiyah had to reinforce its organizational principle by issuing this decree.

Shaping and maintaining institutional logic

Maintaining such institutional logic is not just based on normative values, but also stems from pragmatism. Given the three characteristics of Muhammadiyah, it cannot push its members to vote for a certain political party or candidates. This is also the reason why it has limited mobilization capacity.[14] For Muhammadiyah's survival, it cannot let its members take advantage of it, although it cannot stop its members from being involved in electoral politics as long as this involvement does not bring partisan dynamics to Muhammadiyah. These three internal characteristics made Muhammadiyah reinforce its logic.

Tendency to avoid partisan politics

There has been a historical pattern of avoiding partisan engagement since the 1960s, though Muhammadiyah was affiliated with a political party called Masyumi in the 1950s. When Masyumi was banned by the Sukarno government and its leaders were imprisoned, Muhammadiyah disconnected from Masyumi and left politics for fear of being banned as well (Ward, 1970; Feith, 1963). There was another move to build a political party by modernist Muslims, called *Partai Muslim Indonesia* (PARMUSI, the Indonesian Muslim Party) in the early Suharto government in 1968 after imprisoned Masyumi leaders were released.[15] However, it was repressed by the Suharto government and the military (Ramage, 1995; Porter, 2002). Since then, there has been a widely accepted perception among Muhammadiyah members that party politics is not conducive to the organization. In 1971, Muhammadiyah in its national congress decided to distance itself from partisan politics and to emphasize its autonomy from any organizations and political parties: individuals were free to be political, but Muhammadiyah as an organization was not. The policy was called *Khittah* [Spirit] *1971*. Since then, it has been the overriding principle of Muhammadiyah.

[13] Personal interview with Haidar Natsir, 15 December 2007. [*Kalau politik masuk ke amal usaha Muhammadiyah, amal usaha Muhammadiyah akan hancur, dan Muhammadiyah hancur. Kalau Muhammadiyah hancur, gerakan dakwah hancur, tidak bagus untuk bangsa*.]

[14] Social services that Islamic parties or Islamic charitable organizations provide for the poor are often believed to be effective for garnering votes, as the poor rely on charity for their living (Wedeen, 2003; Mahmood, 2005; Berman, 2003; Volpi, 2003). Muhammadiyah could have turned the existing bonds between itself and its members into patron–client ties, which can be effective for elections (see Scott, 1972).

[15] The Suharto regime allowed PARMUSI only to counterbalance Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which represented traditionalist Islam.

Muhammadiyah also tried to avoid 'low politics', by which it means the politics of mobilization for a particular political party or figure. In Muhammadiyah's experience, competing for party politics distorts religious teachings as well as Muslim politics because it becomes a matter of personal gain and fame rather than organizational benefit (Kuntowijoyo, 1998; Fuad, 2002). Moreover, vying for power becomes a distraction to the organization.

A rising number of Muhammadiyah members became interested in politics and utilized Muhammadiyah as a vehicle for entering into party politics after democratization. Although there is no perfect and permanent way of preventing individuals from utilizing Muhammadiyah for personal gain in politics, Muhammadiyah tried to teach its members about the perils of partisan politics by issuing decrees and reminding them of its *khittah* whenever it faced demands to become political. To mitigate the conflicts of interest that arose from partisan engagement, Muhammadiyah issued *Khittah Denpasar* in 2002.[16] Muhammadiyah believed that it should avoid the entrapment of partisan politics in order to advance its *dakwah* [missionary] movement. Muhammadiyah continues to counterbalance political aspirations by some members with its organizational principle that prioritizes social and religious obligations over politics.

Independent rational investigation

Muhammadiyah's organizational culture nurtures independent rational investigation [*ijtihad*], an idea that can be traced back to its founder Ahmad Dahlan's philosophy. Ahmad Dahlan brought modernist Islam to Indonesia and built Muhammadiyah for the purification of Islamic faith, educational reform and social advancement for Muslims (Palmier, 1954; Peacock, 1978). He wanted the faithful to use their reason to understand and practise Islamic teachings, rather than blindly relying on religious authorities (Nakamura, 1979). Uncritical following of an authority [*taqlid*] could lead to conservatism and the stagnation of Islam. Therefore, Muhammadiyah highlights the importance of *ijtihad* (Nakamura, 1979, p 13). *Ijtihad* is not confined to *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence], but covers current issues, 'including political and economic ethics, corporate and professional alms tax, HIV, combating drug abuse, human rights in an Islamic perspective, the strategy of reform movements, and the development of Islamic thought, and labour relations' (Anwar, 2005, pp 35–36). As senior Muhammadiyah figure Haidar Natsir explains, politics is a choice and not a must for his organization. From Muhammadiyah's perspective, politics belongs within the realm of *ijtihad* [*bagi Muhammadiyah, politik itu pilihan, tempat ijtihad, bukan kewajiban*].[17] As political issues are determined by individual rational thinking, the decision making on political issues is individualized in Muhammadiyah. For this reason, it is difficult for all members to agree on issues of partisan engagement. Moreover, it is against Muhammadiyah's own principles to ask all the members to vote for a particular party or candidate. This is the reason why Muhammadiyah never issued any *fatwas*, *tausiyah* [advisory opinions] or any formal kind of pressure on its members to support PAN, even when many Muhammadiyah members were a part of PAN. This practice puts Muhammadiyah in a dilemma in that it cannot control any partisan

[16] Website: http://www.muhammadiyah.or.id/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=152 (accessed 3 June 2009).

[17] Personal interview with Haidar Natsir, 15 December 2007.

engagement of individual members, while it has a limited capacity to persuade all the members to support particular parties or candidates. Given this, Muhammadiyah emphasized that it had to be shielded from any partisan activities.

Divided elites

In addition to its organizational history and practice, Muhammadiyah cannot unite its members behind a particular candidate or party. Muhammadiyah members are affiliated with various political parties individually.[18] Modernist Muslim figures were co-opted by Suharto to enter into politics to contain the power of traditionalist Muslims and to garner some support among Muslims for his regime (Hefner, 2000). For this reason, the partisan membership of individual members is not limited to PAN, and in fact includes Golkar, *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (PPP, the United Development Party) and *Partai Keadilan Sejatera* (PKS, the Prosperous Justice Party). Reviewing the background of legislators, the only political parties without Muhammadiyah backgrounds are *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* (PKB, the National Awakening Party), which represents traditionalist Islam, and *Partai Damai Sejatera* (PDS, the Prosperous Peace Party), which represents Christianity.[19] Din Syamsuddin, the current chairman of Muhammadiyah, was also the chairman of the research and development section of Golkar during the last days of Suharto.[20] Given their varied partisan membership, pushing for one political party might endanger organizational cohesiveness. At the same time, the politicians with a Muhammadiyah background do not want Muhammadiyah to become partisan. It is considered to be more beneficial for Muhammadiyah to remain neutral.

Back to *Khittah 1971*

Muhammadiyah decided that being a social and religious organization was the best way to balance its religious, social and political roles. While taking care of its religious and social networks, keeping neutral towards partisan politics makes it easier for Muhammadiyah to protect its institutional assets and interests. According to Rizal Sukma, the Executive Director of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta and also a Muhammadiyah board member, Muhammadiyah has gained moral authority and has been more politically influential since its adoption of neutrality towards political parties.[21] In doing so, Muhammadiyah can enjoy the potential for political mobilization and thereby acquire more space for socio-cultural activities that increase its influence in the public sphere. This approach can be called ‘high politics’, in that politics of this

[18] There were about 161 people with Muhammadiyah backgrounds out of 550 legislators in parliament in the 2004–09 Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono Cabinet. Moreover, there are also many ministers with Muhammadiyah backgrounds who are affiliated with different political parties. Bambang Sudibyo (Minister of Education), Siti Fadilah Supari (Minister of Health), Bachtiar Chamsyah (Minister of Social Services), M.S. Kaban (Minister of Forestry), Hidayat Nur Wahid (Chairman of the People’s Consultative Assembly, MPR) and Adhyaksa Dault (Minister of Youth and Sports) are examples.

[19] An anonymous reviewer mentioned that Moeslim Abdurrahman, a leading Muhammadiyah activist, was an activist of PKB and was even appointed as the leader of the advisory board of PKB. But he was not the legislator.

[20] I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

[21] Personal interview with Rizal Sukma, 10 May 2007.

sort purports to deal with moral and ethical values (or social values) rather than the mobilization of political parties, lending support for particular candidates, or engaging in debates over government positions, all of which are activities associated with 'low politics'. Muhammadiyah seeks to engage in a high-minded form of politics to maintain its power (Nashir, 2000; Thanthowi, 2003; Fuad, 2002). Officially, this policy was established at Muhammadiyah's congress in 1971. Recognizing more disadvantages than advantages in power politics, Muhammadiyah advised its members to keep their partisan activities individual and not to interfere with Muhammadiyah's activities.

Conclusion

This paper examines the factors that shape the (dis)engagement of Muhammadiyah, a modernist Muslim organization, with regard to electoral politics. Democratization brought political opportunities to organizations such as Muhammadiyah with mass membership to enter into partisan politics. Muhammadiyah struggled to remain a social and religious organization, despite its leader's attempt to build a political party that straddled the gap between religion and politics. However, Muhammadiyah did not capitalize on its social services and its membership for electoral gain. Instead, it emphasized the principle of non-engagement, and adopted a policy of neutrality towards all political parties.

When Muhammadiyah members are in conflict with one another regarding the direction that the organization should take, the institutional logic that has long existed and that prioritizes its religious and social functions over political ones has kept Muhammadiyah from being actively involved in elections. While there have been attempts by some elites to take advantage of Muhammadiyah for political gain, most members have supported the idea of prioritizing the religious and social mission of the organization. Moreover, political lessons were learned at the beginning of democratization through interactions with political parties and the state, which strengthened this commitment.

The commitment to Muhammadiyah's religious and social mission is based not only on members' normative understanding, but also on pragmatism. Muhammadiyah experienced government repression in the 1960s due to its involvement with a modernist political party, so it has a tendency to avoid partisan politics as an organization. Long before Indonesia's democratization, many Muhammadiyah members were active in various political parties. At the same time, Muhammadiyah encouraged people to practise independent reasoning to decide who to vote for – which limited its mobilizational capacity. As a result, Muhammadiyah could not push its members to support one particular party without the risk of further dividing up the organization. Given these internal characteristics, Muhammadiyah had to reinforce the institutional logic that kept it from fully entering into electoral politics, although it cannot fully control individual members.

This article also demonstrates that religious organizations are not static in dealing with political change. They adapt themselves to a changing environment. Muslim organizations do not automatically enter into politics. The case of Muhammadiyah shows how religious institutions use politics for religious ends and confirm the integrity of their community. They are able to prioritize social and religious identity over political identity despite the attempt by some members to politicize the

organization. Even when individuals and organizations are in conflict with each other, it is difficult for individuals to change a long-established commitment to avoiding a direct involvement in politics.

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