
Islamic Civil Society in Indonesia: NU and Muhammadiyah's Role in Democracy and Social Harmony

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of Islamic civil society in maintaining social harmony and strengthening the future of democracy in Indonesia by highlighting the contributions of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Islamic organizations in the country. Employing a field research design and a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation involving organizational leaders, academics, and relevant sources. The analysis utilized a descriptive-analytical method grounded in the civil society theories proposed by Robert W. Hefner and Larry Diamond. The findings reveal that NU and Muhammadiyah play strategic roles in reinforcing democratic values, promoting tolerance, and sustaining social cohesion within Indonesia's pluralistic society. NU, through the concept of Islam Nusantara, integrates Islamic teachings with local cultural values, while Muhammadiyah advances progressive Islam by emphasizing rationality, education, and social reform. Despite these contributions, Indonesian democracy continues to face significant challenges, including religious populism, identity-based politics, and shifting political dynamics. This study concludes that strengthening Islamic civil society is essential for preserving social stability and ensuring the long-term sustainability of democracy in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Islamic civil society, social harmony, democracy, Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah*

Introduction

Indonesian democracy is often regarded as an important example of how Islam can coexist with a democratic political system. As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia is often considered successful in developing a democratic system that accommodates religious values within a pluralistic political environment (Alam et al., 2023; Safa'at, 2022). In this context, faith-based civil society organizations play a significant role in maintaining social stability and supporting democratic consolidation. Religious organizations function not only as institutions for religious propagation (*da'wah*), but also as influential social actors shaping political dynamics, cultural development, and broader societal life.

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In political science discourse, civil society is understood as a social sphere situated between the state and society, in which citizens can participate independently in public life and autonomously advocate for collective interests (Pearce, 2022). The presence of a strong civil society is often regarded as an essential prerequisite for the sustainability of democracy, as it fosters public participation, strengthens social mediation, and enhances political accountability. In the Indonesian context, Islamic organizations constitute an integral component of civil society due to their extensive social base and strong cultural legitimacy. Within this framework, the concept of Islamic civil society is employed to explain how Islamic-based organizations and social movements contribute to democracy, tolerance, and public participation through Islamic ethical values (Hefner, 2011).

In Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah are the two largest Islamic organizations and are frequently positioned as the principal pillars of Islamic civil society. Both organizations have a long history of fostering a moderate socio-religious life while contributing significantly to the development of democracy in Indonesia. NU is widely recognized for its Islamic approach rooted in the *pesantren* tradition and local cultural values through the concept of *Islam Nusantara*, whereas Muhammadiyah is known as an Islamic reform movement that emphasizes education, rationality, and social transformation (Budiatri, 2025). Despite differences in organizational characteristics and religious approaches, both share a common commitment to moderation, social welfare, and the strengthening of civic life.

The roles of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah extend beyond religious activities, encompassing education, healthcare, and social services through extensive institutional networks across Indonesia. This institutional capacity positions both organizations as significant actors capable of bridging the relationship between the state and society while reinforcing social cohesion and democratic culture (Hafid et al., 2022). Their role becomes increasingly relevant within Indonesia's pluralistic society, where religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity may potentially generate social tensions if not managed inclusively.

This study employs Robert W. Hefner's concept of *Civil Islam* and Larry Diamond's theory of civil society as its analytical framework. Hefner's concept of *Civil Islam* is utilized to understand how Islamic organizations may function as democratic social forces that promote pluralism, moderation, and citizen participation within Muslim societies (Hefner, 2011). Meanwhile, Larry Diamond's civil society theory is applied to analyze the contribution of civil society organizations to democratic consolidation through several key dimensions, including public participation, social mediation, political accountability, and the strengthening of democratic culture (Diamond, 1994). The integration of these two perspectives enables a more systematic analysis of the role of NU and Muhammadiyah as actors of Islamic civil society within Indonesia's democratic landscape.

Previous studies have extensively examined the role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in the context of civil society and democracy in Indonesia. For instance, Hafid et al. (2022) emphasized the contributions of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah to the strengthening of civil society through education, community

empowerment, and social advocacy. Research (Latief & Nashir, 2021) focused on the rise of religious conservatism and identity politics as challenges to democracy in the post-2019 presidential election period. Meanwhile, Noor et al. (2025) explored the political involvement of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in the 2024 presidential election, whereas other studies have discussed the expanding role of Muhammadiyah within civil society at both national and global levels.

Nevertheless, most existing studies tend to examine Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah separately or emphasize specific aspects, such as electoral politics, religious moderation, organizational history, or social services. Studies that specifically analyze how NU and Muhammadiyah simultaneously function as democratic stabilizers and agents of social cohesion amid contemporary political polarization in Indonesia remain relatively limited. This gap warrants further examination, as it may theoretically contribute to the development of Islamic civil society studies, particularly by explaining how faith-based organizations can sustain democratic resilience in Muslim-majority countries. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the roles of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah as principal actors in Islamic civil society in maintaining social harmony and strengthening the future of democracy in Indonesia.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze the role of Islamic civil society in maintaining social harmony and strengthening the future of democracy in Indonesia. This approach was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of socio-political dynamics, institutional practices, and the contributions of Islamic organizations to democracy and social cohesion. Furthermore, qualitative methods allow researchers to contextually understand how organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah perform social, educational, and policy advocacy functions within a pluralistic society (Creswell J. David & Creswell and John W., 2018).

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach, focusing on an in-depth analysis of NU and Muhammadiyah as the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, both of which exert significant influence on the country's social and political life. This approach examines how these organizations function as actors within Islamic civil society, fostering public participation, mediating social relations, and strengthening democratic stability amid the challenges of political polarization and religious identity politics.

The study was conducted between June and August 2025 in Jakarta, selected as the research site for its central role as a hub for Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah activities, particularly in education, social advocacy, and public policy discourse on democracy and religious moderation.

Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with six key informants selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria, including holding strategic organizational positions, having at least 5 years of involvement, and demonstrating a substantial understanding of issues related to democracy, social harmony, and Islamic civil

society. The informants consisted of elite members of Muhammadiyah and NU, academics, and prominent figures actively engaged in religious and democratic policy discourse.

The relatively limited number of informants was determined based on the nature of qualitative case study research, which prioritizes information richness over representativeness. Informants were selected for their strategic positions and substantive experience, enabling the collection of in-depth, relevant data aligned with the research focus. Data collection was concluded when the information obtained demonstrated recurring thematic patterns and no substantially new themes emerged (thematic saturation). Nevertheless, this study acknowledges that the limited number of informants may restrict the generalizability of the findings; therefore, the results primarily reflect the perspectives of organizational elites and key actors involved in the discourse of Islamic civil society in Indonesia.

Secondary data were collected from scholarly journal articles, academic books, policy reports, organizational documents, and prior studies on Islamic civil society and democracy in Indonesia. These sources were utilized to strengthen the theoretical framework and support the interpretation of field findings.

Data collection was conducted through three principal techniques: in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Observations were conducted during organizational discussion forums, national seminars, and public events on religious moderation and democracy throughout the research period. Meanwhile, document analysis was employed to examine official statements, institutional publications, and policy documents from both organizations.

Data analysis was carried out through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing using a thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and organizational documents were coded to identify key patterns related to democratic participation, social harmony, religious moderation, and the role of Islamic organizations in democratic consolidation. To enhance the validity of the findings, this study employed source and methodological triangulation by comparing evidence obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation.

This study applies Robert W. Hefner's concept of *Civil Islam* to analyze how Islamic organizations function as social forces that support pluralism and citizen participation, while Larry Diamond's civil society theory is employed to understand the contribution of civil society organizations to public participation, social mediation, accountability, and democratic consolidation (Diamond, 1994; Hefner, 2011).

Results and Discussion

Islamic Civil Society and Democratic Participation in Indonesia

The concept of Islamic civil society in Indonesia demonstrates distinctive characteristics compared with that in other Muslim-majority countries. In political science and the sociology of religion, civil society is understood as a social sphere situated between the state and society, where citizens can organize independently to pursue social, political, and cultural interests without direct state domination (Destyanto et al., 2022). The existence of a strong civil society is widely regarded as an essential prerequisite for democratic

sustainability, as it serves as a space for public participation, a mechanism for monitoring state power, and a means of reinforcing democratic values such as tolerance, pluralism, and civil liberties. In the Indonesian context, civil society is shaped not only through secular organizations but also strengthened by religious organizations that possess extensive social legitimacy and cultural influence.

The distinctiveness of civil society in Indonesia lies in the active involvement of Islamic organizations in social and political life. Unlike several Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East, where tensions between religion and democracy are often pronounced, Indonesia's experience demonstrates a more cooperative pattern of interaction. Islam is not merely a religious identity but also a source of public ethics capable of sustaining democracy and social stability (Kuru, 2021). In this context, the concept of Islamic civil society is used to explain how Islamic organizations function as social actors that support democratization, expand citizen participation, and maintain social cohesion in a pluralistic society (Jati, 2024).

The two largest Islamic organizations, frequently regarded as the principal pillars of Islamic civil society in Indonesia, are Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah (Barton et al., 2021). Both organizations have a long history of fostering a moderate socio-religious life while playing significant roles in the development of Indonesian democracy. Founded in 1926, NU developed through the *pesantren* network and traditional Muslim communities (Hidayat et al., 2022), whereas Muhammadiyah, established in 1912, emerged as an Islamic reform movement emphasizing rationality, education, and social reform (Akbar et al., 2024). Despite their differing religious orientations— Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) being more culturally traditionalist and Muhammadiyah more modernist—both organizations demonstrate a relatively consistent commitment to strengthening civil society, promoting tolerance, and sustaining democratic life.

From the perspective of Larry Diamond's civil society theory, the existence of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah can be understood through four principal functions of civil society: public participation, social mediation, political accountability, and the strengthening of democratic culture (Diamond, 1994). In practice, these organizations do not merely perform religious functions but also serve as mediators between the state and society through educational networks, social services, policy advocacy, and public forums that reinforce civic participation.

The findings reveal that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah play a significant role in expanding democratic participation through their educational institutions and social organizations. Both possess extensive educational networks, ranging from *pesantren*, primary and secondary schools, to higher education institutions. The educational frameworks they develop emphasize not only religious instruction but also the cultivation of socio-political awareness by promoting nationalism, tolerance, and critical thinking (Akbar et al., 2024). Within Diamond's framework, this condition illustrates how civil society organizations can serve as arenas for civic education, enabling citizens to better understand political rights, social responsibilities, and democratic mechanisms.

In addition to education, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah also perform social mediation functions through various healthcare services, humanitarian assistance, and community empowerment programs. Muhammadiyah, for instance, maintains an extensive network of hospitals and social institutions across Indonesia, while Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) utilizes its *pesantren* network and social organizations to strengthen solidarity at the grassroots level. This mediating function is significant because it demonstrates how Islamic organizations operate not only at the symbolic-religious level but also concretely address society's social needs. In a pluralistic society, the capacity of Islamic organizations to foster social solidarity is an important foundation for democratic stability.

From Robert W. Hefner's perspective, this phenomenon can be explained through the concept of *Civil Islam*, referring to a condition in which Islamic organizations function as democratic social forces that promote pluralism, citizen participation, and inclusive public life (Hefner, 2011). Field findings indicate that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah do not perceive democracy as a system incompatible with religion; rather, they regard it as an ethical space through which public welfare can be pursued.

This perspective is reflected in an interview with a Muhammadiyah figure who emphasized that democracy should not be understood merely as a contest for political power, but rather as an instrument for advancing social justice and the public interest. As stated:

"Muhammadiyah does not perceive politics merely as a struggle for power. Democracy should serve as a platform for advancing public interests and constitutional justice" (S. Abdul Hakim, 3 July 2025).

From an analytical perspective, this statement is significant as it demonstrates how Muhammadiyah constructs democracy as a *moral space* that must be guided by ethical values rather than reduced to electoral competition alone. This finding further supports Hefner's argument that moderate Islamic organizations in Indonesia tend to function as *democratic stabilizers* rather than actors promoting exclusive religious politics.

Similar findings are also evident within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). One Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) figure emphasized that democratic stability should be built upon social harmony and cultural engagement rather than political confrontation. He explained:

"NU prioritizes cultural dialogue and social networks through *pesantren* and religious scholars (*ulama*). Democracy must be preserved through social harmony, not political confrontation" (Ahmad Suedy, 4 July 2025).

Analytically, this statement reflects the distinctive character of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as an organization grounded in traditional authority and *pesantren* networks, employing cultural approaches to maintain social stability. Unlike Muhammadiyah, which places greater emphasis on institutional rationality and modern education, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) tends to rely on the authority of *ulama* and socio-religious traditions to build social legitimacy. Consequently, both organizations demonstrate distinct yet complementary models of Islamic civil society: NU through a culturally grounded Islamic approach, and Muhammadiyah through progressive and reformist Islam.

Nevertheless, this study also finds that the roles of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah within civil society are not entirely free from challenges and internal contradictions. In several instances, the proximity of organizational elites to political power may create risks of co-optation and reduce organizational independence as a mechanism for monitoring the state. Furthermore, electoral dynamics occasionally generate internal fragmentation within these organizations, as reflected in variation in elite political support for particular candidates during major national political moments. This condition suggests that Islamic civil society in Indonesia is neither entirely homogeneous nor immune from political pragmatism.

Despite these challenges, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah continue to maintain strategic positions as influential civil society actors within Indonesia's democratic life. Their contributions are evident not only in preserving social stability but also in fostering a more inclusive democratic culture. In this regard, Jeremy Menchik argues that Indonesian democracy has developed through a synthesis between religious values and the principles of modern democracy, rather than through a secularist model that completely separates religion from the public sphere (Menchik, 2015).

Based on these findings, it can be understood that Islamic civil society in Indonesia plays an important role in strengthening democracy through public participation, social mediation, the promotion of tolerance, and moral oversight of political authority. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah demonstrate that religious organizations do not necessarily constitute a threat to democracy; rather, they can serve as social forces that sustain a pluralistic, inclusive, and democratic public life. In this context, Indonesia's experience illustrates that the relationship between Islam and democracy tends to be more negotiative and cooperative than antagonistic.

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Social Harmony

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) plays an important role in maintaining social harmony in Indonesia through a religious approach that emphasizes moderation, cultural dialogue, and the strengthening of social solidarity. As the largest Islamic organization with deep roots in the *pesantren* tradition and traditional Muslim communities, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) functions not only as a religious institution but also as a civil society actor that contributes to social stability in Indonesia's pluralistic society (Barton et al., 2021). In a society characterized by religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity, NU's capacity to foster inclusive social relations constitutes an important factor in preventing social conflict and strengthening social cohesion (Gunawan, 2024).

The findings indicate that NU's approach to social harmony is not limited to formal religious preaching (*da'wah*) but is also pursued through social and cultural strategies deeply embedded in community life. Through various organizational activities, NU actively promotes intergroup dialogue, strengthens community-level social relations, and facilitates peaceful conflict resolution. Based on field observations, NU's involvement is evident in intergroup social forums, open religious activities, and dialogue spaces that bring

together people from diverse backgrounds. One informant from NU's organizational elite emphasized:

"From the beginning, NU has upheld the tradition of togetherness. We do not perceive differences as threats, but rather as realities that must be approached through peaceful cultural and religious means" (Ahmad Suedy, 4 July 2025).

This statement suggests that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) perceives diversity not as a threat to religious identity, but rather as a social reality that should be managed through an inclusive approach. From Larry Diamond's perspective, such a role reflects the function of civil society as a social mediator that helps reduce the potential for conflict through intergroup communication and the strengthening of public solidarity (Barton et al., 2021). In other words, NU performs not only religious functions but also an important role in social mediation in preserving democratic stability.

NU's cultural approach to maintaining social harmony is inseparable from the concept of *Islam Nusantara*. However, this study finds that *Islam Nusantara* is more appropriately understood as a social strategy rather than merely a theological concept. It serves as a mechanism for social adaptation, enabling Islam to interact harmoniously with local culture without compromising its core principles (Muttaqin et al., 2025). This approach is significant because it legitimizes cultural diversity while simultaneously preventing the emergence of religious exclusivism.

In field interviews, Ulil Absar Abdalla explained that *Islam Nusantara* is not merely an organizational slogan but rather a social practice embedded in the everyday lives of NU communities:

"*Islam Nusantara* is not merely a concept, but a way of everyday life. We preserve local traditions as part of *da'wah* so that Islam can be present in a friendly and non-exclusive manner" (U. A. Abdallah, 15 July 2025).

This statement illustrates NU's accommodative approach toward social realities. Analytically, this finding supports Robert W. Hefner's argument concerning *Civil Islam*, namely that moderate Islamic organizations can function as social forces that strengthen pluralism and public participation through non-confrontational approaches (Hefner, 2011). In the Indonesian context, NU practices a model of civil Islam through *da'wah* strategies that prioritize cultural adaptation, social reconciliation, and respect for social plurality.

NU's contribution to social harmony is further reinforced through its extensive *pesantren* network spread across various regions of Indonesia. The findings reveal that *pesantren* function not only as religious educational institutions but also as spaces for cultivating social values such as tolerance, solidarity, and respect for diversity. Through community-based education, NU-affiliated *pesantren* possess significant capacity to foster a culture of dialogue at the grassroots level. Previous studies have demonstrated that *pesantren* within NU's network play an important role in promoting interreligious relations and mitigating social conflicts in various regions (Ambarwati, 2023).

From a civil society perspective, this *pesantren* network performs a strategic function as a space for fostering *civic consciousness*. *Kiai* and *pesantren* leaders often serve not only as religious authorities but also as social mediators possessing strong legitimacy in resolving community conflicts (Musaddad, 2025). Thus, NU's traditional authority operates not only within the symbolic sphere of religion but also fulfills socio-political functions in maintaining social harmony.

Beyond its *pesantren* network, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has also expanded its role through various global initiatives emphasizing universal humanitarian values. One emerging approach is the concept of *Humanitarian Islam*, which seeks to strengthen the relationship between Islam, peace, and modern citizenship. This concept demonstrates NU's efforts to position Islam as a moral source that can promote interreligious peace and global solidarity (Tania et al., 2024). Such an approach suggests that NU's commitment to social harmony extends beyond the national context and incorporates a transnational dimension, positioning Islam as part of the solution to global social conflicts.

Nevertheless, this study also finds that NU's position as a civil society actor is not entirely free from challenges. The proximity of certain NU elites to political power during electoral moments may generate tensions between the ideals of moderation and political pragmatism. In certain contexts, the political engagement of NU elites may strengthen the organization's influence in public policymaking; however, it may simultaneously reduce its independence as a mechanism for monitoring the state. This finding aligns with Noor's research on internal political fragmentation within NU, which highlights differences in political preferences among organizational elites (Noor et al., 2025).

At the same time, another challenge emerges from the increasing polarization of religious identity in Indonesian politics. Under such circumstances, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) faces pressure to maintain its moderate position while preserving its traditional social base. This tension illustrates that religious moderation is not a fully stable process, but rather an arena of negotiation that continuously evolves alongside national political dynamics.

Despite these challenges, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) continues to demonstrate a substantial capacity to maintain social harmony in Indonesia. This is evident in its consistent efforts to promote interreligious dialogue, reject violence in the name of religion, and strengthen moderation-based education. From Jeremy Menchik's perspective, this condition suggests that Indonesian democracy develops through a synthesis between religious values and social pluralism rather than through an absolute separation between religion and the public sphere (Menchik, 2015).

Based on these findings, NU's contribution to social harmony lies not only in strengthening religious identity but also in building social bridges amid Indonesia's diverse society. Through cultural approaches, *pesantren* networks, and the practice of moderate Islam, NU demonstrates that religious organizations can function as civil society forces that support democracy while strengthening social cohesion. Accordingly, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) serves not only as a guardian of Indonesia's Islamic traditions but also as a crucial actor in maintaining social stability and the sustainability of democracy.

Muhammadiyah and Progressive Islam in Maintaining Social Harmony

Muhammadiyah plays an important role in maintaining social harmony in Indonesia through a progressive Islamic approach that emphasizes rationality, education, social reform, and humanitarian service (Nashir, 2019). Unlike Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which places greater emphasis on cultural approaches and the *pesantren* tradition, Muhammadiyah develops a social strategy grounded in Islamic modernism to foster a Muslim society open to social change and scientific advancement (Al-Hamdi, 2019). Within Indonesia's pluralistic society, this approach enables Muhammadiyah to contribute not only to strengthening religious life but also to promoting social solidarity and inclusive democracy.

The findings indicate that Muhammadiyah perceives social harmony as part of Islam's moral responsibility to establish a just and harmonious public life. The organization does not regard religion merely as a symbolic identity but rather as a source of social ethics that must be realized through education, social services, and community empowerment. Through its various institutional activities, Muhammadiyah actively develops social dialogue forums, public policy advocacy, and healthcare and educational services accessible to all members of society, regardless of religious or ethnic background.

This approach is rooted in the concept of progressive Islam, a perspective that emphasizes openness to change, rational thinking, and Muslims' social responsibility in addressing societal challenges. From Muhammadiyah's perspective, religion is not understood in an exclusive or defensive manner, but rather as a transformational force capable of promoting social progress. One Muhammadiyah informant explained:

"Progressive Islam means that Muslims must be able to think rationally and remain open to change. We emphasize the importance of education as the primary pathway to social advancement. Being religious alone is insufficient; Muslims must also possess intellectual and social capacities. In this way, Muslims can contribute to modern life" (S. Abdul Hakim, 3 July 2025).

This statement demonstrates how Muhammadiyah links religion to the agenda of social modernization. Analytically, this approach reflects Muhammadiyah's efforts to cultivate an Islamic civil society that is not only religious but also adaptive to contemporary developments. From Robert W. Hefner's perspective, this condition illustrates how moderate Islamic organizations may become part of *Civil Islam*, functioning as social actors that strengthen democracy by promoting pluralism, education, and public participation (Hefner, 2011). In this context, Muhammadiyah does not merely carry out *da'wah* activities but also constructs social spaces that enable broader and more inclusive civic participation.

One of Muhammadiyah's most tangible contributions to maintaining social harmony is reflected in its modern educational system. Since the early twentieth century, Muhammadiyah has established thousands of educational institutions ranging from kindergartens to universities throughout Indonesia. The findings reveal that Muhammadiyah's educational institutions not only teach religious sciences but also integrate modern education to cultivate rational, tolerant, and socially conscious individuals.

Within Larry Diamond's civil society framework, Muhammadiyah's educational initiatives can be understood as a form of strengthening *democratic civic culture*, as they create spaces for civic education that instill values of social responsibility, public participation, and respect for diversity (Diamond, 1994). Previous studies have demonstrated that Muhammadiyah's progressive educational model successfully bridges Islamic values, modernity, and Indonesian national identity (Suyatno et al., 2022). Accordingly, Muhammadiyah's education system functions not only as a mechanism for transmitting knowledge but also as a means of cultivating democratic citizens.

Beyond education, Muhammadiyah also plays a strategic role through social and humanitarian services. The organization possesses an extensive network of hospitals, orphanages, zakat institutions, and community empowerment programs throughout Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that these services are not restricted to particular Muslim communities but instead extend to society at large, regardless of religious or ethnic identity. This inclusive approach illustrates how Muhammadiyah constructs social harmony through concrete public service practices.

Previous studies have shown that Muhammadiyah's charitable institutional network contributes significantly to improving public welfare while simultaneously strengthening social solidarity (Junarti et al., 2023). Analytically, this condition demonstrates Muhammadiyah's role in performing social mediation, as conceptualized by Diamond, by bridging societal needs and reducing the potential for social conflict through universally accessible services. In a pluralistic society such as Indonesia, this service-oriented strategy is particularly important, as it creates spaces for social interaction across identity boundaries.

In the context of democracy, Muhammadiyah consistently emphasizes the importance of dialogue and ethical responsibility in political life. One Muhammadiyah leader emphasized that religion should not be reduced to an exclusive political instrument:

"We believe that religion should not be used as a narrow political instrument. Islam must serve as a unifying moral force rather than a source of division. Therefore, we consistently encourage dialogue and openness within society. Democracy must be filled with ethical values and social responsibility" (Anwar Abbas, 11 July 2025).

This statement indicates Muhammadiyah's effort to distance itself from identity-based political approaches that may deepen social polarization. From Jeremy Menchik's perspective, the Indonesian democratic model evolves through negotiation between religious values and social pluralism, with moderate Islamic organizations playing an important role in maintaining this balance (Menchik, 2015). Through its progressive Islamic approach, Muhammadiyah appears committed to preserving religion as a source of public ethics without transforming it into an exclusive instrument of political mobilization.

Nevertheless, this study also finds that Muhammadiyah faces several challenges in maintaining its moderate position. One of the primary challenges is the increasing politicization of religious identity in the public sphere, which may encourage segments of the organization to adopt more pragmatic political positions. During certain national political moments, variations in the attitudes of Muhammadiyah elites toward particular candidates

or policies reveal that the organization is not entirely homogeneous in its political orientation.

Furthermore, tensions emerge between the ideals of progressive Islam and the increasingly polarized socio-political reality of society. In some cases, Muhammadiyah faces a dilemma between maintaining organizational independence as a civil society force and becoming more actively involved in practical political advocacy to advance the interests of the Muslim community. This tension demonstrates that the role of Islamic organizations in democracy does not always progress linearly but is also shaped by shifting political dynamics and competing interests.

Compared to Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah demonstrates a model of Islamic civil society that places greater emphasis on institutional rationality and educational modernism. Whereas NU relies primarily on cultural authority through *pesantren* and the *ulama*, Muhammadiyah derives its legitimacy from rational-bureaucratic institutions in education, healthcare, and social services. Nevertheless, both organizations share a common orientation toward strengthening social cohesion and supporting inclusive democratic life.

Based on these findings, Muhammadiyah plays a significant role in maintaining social harmony through a progressive Islamic approach grounded in education, social services, and public dialogue. Its contribution extends beyond strengthening religious life to fostering a society that is more tolerant, rational, and open to diversity. Within Indonesia's pluralistic context, Muhammadiyah demonstrates that Islamic organizations can function as civil society actors that not only preserve social stability but also strengthen the foundations of democracy through inclusive social practices.

Challenges of Democratic Consolidation: Polarization, Identity Politics, and the Dilemma of Islamic Civil Society

Although Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah play important roles in strengthening democracy and maintaining social cohesion in Indonesia, the process of democratic consolidation continues to face increasingly complex challenges. In recent years, national political dynamics have demonstrated growing social polarization, religious populism, and the politicization of identity, all of which potentially threaten the quality of Indonesian democracy. This situation presents new challenges for Islamic civil society organizations, particularly NU and Muhammadiyah, in maintaining their roles as independent social forces while simultaneously safeguarding democratic stability.

The findings reveal that one of the most significant challenges confronting Indonesian democracy today is the increasing use of religious identity as an instrument of political mobilization. Religion-based identity politics in several national political moments has generated considerable social fragmentation, particularly during electoral contests. Under such circumstances, moderate Islamic organizations face a dilemma between preserving their moral position as guardians of social harmony and becoming more actively involved in practical political arenas.

One Muhammadiyah informant emphasized that faith-based civil society organizations possess a moral responsibility to preserve the quality of democracy and prevent it from being reduced to short-term political interests:

“Organizations such as Muhammadiyah have a moral responsibility to maintain democracy on the right path. We are involved not only in religious matters but also in issues of nationhood and social justice. Democracy must be safeguarded so that it does not deviate from ethical and constitutional values. If civil society becomes weak, democracy will also weaken” (Muhammad Reza Prima, 24 June 2025).

This statement indicates that Muhammadiyah perceives democracy not merely as a political procedure, but as an ethical system that requires active oversight from civil society. From Larry Diamond’s perspective, civil society performs strategic functions in monitoring state power, strengthening citizen participation, and preventing the concentration of authority that may threaten democratic processes (Diamond, 1994). Accordingly, the involvement of Islamic organizations in safeguarding democracy extends beyond normative commitments and becomes part of broader mechanisms of social accountability.

The findings further indicate that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) performs a comparable role in maintaining the balance between religion and democracy. One Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) elite emphasized that public political participation remains important but must operate within ethical boundaries and avoid generating social conflict that may undermine social unity:

“NU regards democracy as part of the effort to protect the interests of the people. We encourage citizens to participate actively, but always within ethical boundaries and religious values. Political participation is important, but it must be accompanied by moral responsibility. This is where NU plays its role—not merely following political dynamics, but providing direction” (Rumadi Ahmad, 18 July 2025).

This statement demonstrates that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) perceives democracy as a participatory arena that must be preserved through moderation and social responsibility. From Robert W. Hefner’s perspective, this approach reflects the characteristics of *Civil Islam*, in which moderate Islamic organizations function as social actors supporting pluralism and democracy without becoming trapped in exclusive forms of religious politics (Hefner, 2011). In other words, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah seek to sustain democracy by strengthening public morality rather than through formal political domination.

Nevertheless, this study also finds that the relationship between Islamic organizations and democracy does not always follow a linear trajectory. One of the principal challenges is the rise of religious populism within Indonesia’s political sphere. Religious populism tends to instrumentalize religious symbols and sentiments to secure political legitimacy, which in some cases may intensify social polarization. When religion becomes a tool of political mobilization, democracy risks narrowing deliberative space, as society becomes increasingly divided along symbolic identities rather than substantive interests.

In this context, moderate Islamic organizations face a strategic dilemma. On the one hand, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah are expected to maintain a distance from practical politics to preserve their independence as civil society actors. On the other hand, they cannot fully disengage from political processes, as state policies directly affect the interests of Muslim communities and society at large. This tension illustrates how Islamic civil society organizations often occupy an ambiguous position between serving as independent moral forces and political actors with strategic interests.

Field findings indicate that both Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah experienced elite fragmentation in determining political orientations during several national political moments. Variations in political support among organizational elites suggest that Islamic civil society is not homogeneous. This condition reveals spaces of political pragmatism that are often difficult to avoid, particularly when organizational elites maintain close relations with state actors or particular political interests. Research (Noor et al., 2025), for example, demonstrates that the political involvement of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) elites in national politics is influenced by a combination of ideological and pragmatic considerations.

Nevertheless, internal fragmentation does not necessarily indicate the weakening of civil society organizations. From a democratic perspective, diversity of political viewpoints within organizations may instead reflect healthy internal deliberation and relative freedom of expression. The greater concern emerges when proximity to state power risks weakening the organization's oversight function toward public policy. In this regard, preserving civil society's independence is crucial to sustaining the quality of Indonesian democracy.

Another challenge faced by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah is the growing influence of exclusive religious groups that promote more confrontational approaches to democracy and pluralism. In some cases, the emergence of rigid identity-based movements has created pressure on the moderate positions of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. This situation compels both organizations to continuously strengthen strategies for religious moderation through education, *da'wah*, and social dialogue to remain relevant amid shifting socio-political dynamics.

Jeremy Menchik argues that Indonesian democracy develops through a complex relationship between religion and the state that is neither fully secular nor entirely theocratic (Menchik, 2015). Within this context, NU and Muhammadiyah perform an important role as democratic buffers, helping to maintain balance between religious aspirations and social pluralism. However, the effectiveness of this role depends significantly on both organizations' ability to preserve their moral legitimacy and institutional independence.

From a comparative perspective, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah employ different strategies in responding to democratic challenges. NU relies more heavily on cultural networks, religious authority, and community-based approaches to maintain social harmony. In contrast, Muhammadiyah tends to prioritize education, social services, and public policy advocacy as instruments for strengthening democracy. These differing strategies indicate that Islamic civil society in Indonesia is not monolithic but rather evolves through multiple, complementary forms of social adaptation.

Based on these findings, the challenges of democratic consolidation in Indonesia stem not only from weaknesses in formal political institutions but also from growing social polarization, religious populism, and pressures on civil society's independence. Under such circumstances, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah continue to occupy strategic positions as social forces capable of maintaining a balance between religion, democracy, and social stability. However, the effectiveness of this role depends greatly on their ability to preserve institutional independence, strengthen moderation, and avoid political co-optation that may weaken the critical function of Islamic civil society.

The Future of Islamic Civil Society and Indonesian Democracy

The future of Indonesian democracy is profoundly influenced by the capacity of civil society to maintain a balance between state power, political interests, and public participation. In this context, faith-based civil society organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah occupy strategic positions, as they possess not only extensive social constituencies but also strong moral legitimacy. As the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah play roles that extend beyond religious life and possess considerable capacity to shape the trajectory of democracy through political education, public policy advocacy, and the strengthening of a culture of tolerance (Khozin, 2017).

The findings indicate that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah play significant roles in fostering public awareness of substantive democracy—understood not merely as an electoral procedure but as a system that guarantees social justice, citizen participation, and respect for diversity. Through various public forums, both organizations actively engage in discussions concerning nationhood, religious moderation, and the reinforcement of constitutional values as the foundation of democratic life.

One Muhammadiyah informant emphasized that Islamic organizations possess a moral responsibility to preserve the direction of democracy within ethical and constitutional boundaries. As explained:

“Organizations such as Muhammadiyah have a moral responsibility to maintain democracy on the right path. We are involved not only in religious matters but also in issues of nationhood and social justice. Democracy must be safeguarded so that it does not deviate from ethical and constitutional values. If civil society becomes weak, democracy will also weaken” (Muhammad Reza Prima, 24 June 2025).

This statement demonstrates that Muhammadiyah perceives democracy as a moral arena requiring civil society oversight to prevent its degradation into a mere competition for power. From Larry Diamond's perspective, the role of civil society extends beyond encouraging citizen participation to monitoring state authority and strengthening a healthy democratic culture (Diamond, 1994). Accordingly, Muhammadiyah's involvement in national issues and public policymaking illustrates how religious organizations may function as mechanisms of social accountability within democratic governance.

Similar findings are evident within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which consistently perceives democracy as an instrument for safeguarding public interests and maintaining social stability. One NU elite emphasized that political participation is essential for sustaining democratic quality but must remain grounded in ethical and religious principles:

“NU regards democracy as part of the effort to protect the interests of the people. We encourage citizens to participate actively, but always within ethical boundaries and religious values. Political participation is important, but it must be accompanied by moral responsibility” (Rumadi Ahmad, 18 July 2025).

Analytically, this perspective suggests that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) positions democracy as a space for social negotiation that must be preserved through moderation and social harmony. From Robert W. Hefner’s perspective, this approach reflects the characteristics of *Civil Islam*, a condition in which moderate Islamic organizations not only accept democracy but also actively sustain pluralism and inclusive public life (Hefner, 2011). In other words, the future of Indonesian democracy is determined not solely by state institutions but also by the capacity of Islamic civil society organizations to maintain democratic legitimacy at the grassroots level.

Looking toward the future, this study identifies at least three strategic areas in which Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah may significantly contribute to strengthening Indonesian democracy: public political education, the promotion of social tolerance, and inclusive public policy advocacy. First, through their extensive educational networks, both organizations possess considerable capacity to cultivate a more critical and participatory political consciousness among citizens. Political education is not conducted solely through schools or universities but also through youth organizations, religious gatherings (*pengajian*), social forums, and *da’wah* activities that encourage public understanding of citizens’ rights, constitutional values, and social responsibility.

Second, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah play important roles in strengthening social tolerance in Indonesia’s multicultural society. In a society vulnerable to identity-based polarization, the presence of moderate Islamic organizations becomes crucial in preventing religion- or ethnicity-based conflicts. Research indicates that moderate Islamic organizations in Indonesia make significant contributions to strengthening social cohesion and promoting conflict resolution through dialogue and non-violent approaches (Fitria Sari et al., 2026). This finding demonstrates that the future of Indonesian democracy depends substantially on civil society’s ability to preserve an inclusive public sphere.

Third, both organizations possess considerable capacity to advocate for public policies that are more responsive to societal interests. Based on field observations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah actively provide input on state policies through formal forums, public discussions, and policy institutions operating within their respective organizational structures. One Muhammadiyah informant emphasized:

“We do not merely criticize policies; we also offer solutions. Through its various institutions, Muhammadiyah engages in public policy advocacy that prioritizes societal

interests. This is part of our responsibility as a civil society organization to maintain a balance of power” (Muhammad Reza Prima, 24 June 2025).

This statement indicates that Muhammadiyah not only performs a critical function toward the state but also proposes policy alternatives. From Diamond’s perspective, this demonstrates the role of civil society as an intermediary between society and the state, enabling public aspirations to be translated into more inclusive policymaking (Diamond, 1994).

Nevertheless, the future of Islamic civil society in Indonesia is inseparable from several serious challenges. One of the most pressing concerns is the rise of religious populism and identity politics, both of which may intensify social polarization. When religion is instrumentalized as an exclusive political tool, democratic public spaces risk fragmentation, thereby reducing the quality of public deliberation. Under such conditions, NU and Muhammadiyah are required to preserve their moderate positions amid increasing pressures from more exclusive religious groups.

Another challenge stems from the potential political co-optation of Islamic civil society organizations. The proximity of organizational elites to political power may weaken institutional independence and diminish the organization’s ability to monitor the state effectively. In several instances, elite fragmentation and political pragmatism also emerge as internal challenges affecting organizational effectiveness in preserving democratic quality. This condition demonstrates that Islamic civil society organizations do not always occupy ideal positions but often face dilemmas between maintaining independence and pursuing specific strategic interests.

Jeremy Menchik explains that Indonesian democracy evolves through a dynamic relationship between religion and the state, in which Islamic organizations play important roles in balancing social pluralism and religious identity (Menchik, 2015). In this context, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah may be understood as democratic stabilizers that help prevent Indonesian democracy from becoming trapped in either political extremism or secularism that entirely marginalizes religion from the public sphere.

Based on these findings, the future of Indonesian democracy depends largely on the capacity of Islamic civil society to preserve institutional independence, expand civic education, and strengthen a culture of tolerance. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah possess substantial social capital to perform these roles through their educational networks, social services, and the moral legitimacy of their *ulama* and intellectual communities. Accordingly, strengthening Islamic civil society is not only essential for the sustainability of Indonesian democracy but may also provide an alternative model for Muslim-majority countries seeking to cultivate more harmonious relationships between religion, democracy, and pluralistic public life.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah play strategic roles as principal actors of Islamic civil society in maintaining social harmony and

strengthening democracy in Indonesia. Empirically, both organizations contribute through distinct yet complementary approaches. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) tends to develop culturally grounded strategies and *pesantren* networks to reinforce social harmony, whereas Muhammadiyah places greater emphasis on modern education, social reform, and public policy advocacy. The findings further indicate that both organizations function as social mediators, promoters of public participation, and guardians of religious moderation amid growing political polarization and identity politics.

Theoretically, this study reinforces Robert W. Hefner's argument regarding *Civil Islam* by demonstrating that Islamic organizations in Indonesia function not merely as religious institutions but also as social forces that support pluralism, tolerance, and democracy. Furthermore, this study extends Larry Diamond's civil society theory by illustrating how NU and Muhammadiyah fulfill the functions of public participation, social mediation, moral accountability, and democratic consolidation in a pluralistic Muslim society. Accordingly, this study contributes to broader debates concerning religion and democracy by demonstrating that Islamic organizations may simultaneously function as moral authorities, democratic mediators, and agents of social cohesion. The practical implications of this study underscore the importance of strengthening collaboration between the state and Islamic civil society organizations in civic education, religious moderation, and the resolution of social conflicts. Nevertheless, maintaining the independence of civil society organizations remains a crucial prerequisite for ensuring that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah can preserve their critical role in monitoring political authority. Future research may expand this inquiry by comparatively examining the role of Islamic civil society at local and regional levels across Southeast Asia.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used generative artificial intelligence (AI) and AI-assisted technologies (ChatGPT) solely to support the writing process, including language refinement, grammar improvement, and enhancement of academic readability. These technologies were not used for data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or generation of research results.

The author takes full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the content of this article, including all interpretations, arguments, and conclusions presented. All data, findings, and analytical processes reported in this study were conducted independently by the author in accordance with academic and research ethics.

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