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# Local Dynamics and Global Engagements of the Islamic Modernist Movement in Contemporary Indonesia: The Case of Muhammadiyah (2000-2020)

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## Abstract

This article examines the engagement of Indonesian Islamic civil society organisations in the international arena by paying particular attention to the role of the Islamic modernist movement, Muhammadiyah. Beyond its vibrant religious and social activism in the domestic context of Indonesia, Muhammadiyah has, in the past thirty years, engaged in various international affairs such as peacekeeping operations, humanitarian activities, and politics. This engagement indicates that Muhammadiyah has attempted to strengthen its international exposure and contribute to the global community. By examining Muhammadiyah's vision and activism, both discursively and practically, this article seeks to know why it is so essential for Indonesian Islamic civil society organisations, such as Muhammadiyah, to be involved in the international arena, and what Muhammadiyah engagement means for the global picture of Islam in the Muslim world.

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**Keywords**

Muhammadiyah, philanthropy, humanitarian, Muslim non-governmental organisations, *ijtihad*

**Introduction**

In August 2017, shortly after the dispatch of more than 500,000 people of ethnic Rohingya to Cox's Bazar Bangladesh due to the humanitarian crises and persecution taking place in the Rakhine province of Myanmar, the mobilisation of aid in Indonesia was organised by some Muslim organisations, including Muhammadiyah, the largest Muslim modernist civil society movement in Indonesia. After collecting sufficient funds, the Muhammadiyah's humanitarian team under the umbrella of Muhammadiyah Aid, in partnership with the Indonesian Humanitarian Alliance (IHA), were dispatched to Bangladesh to deliver aid for the refugees on 22 September 2017. The volunteers, consisting of medical doctors and nurses, were recruited from Muhammadiyah's hospitals and universities. They were deployed in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar for a few weeks before another group of volunteers substituted them to continue the mission. At that juncture, Muhammadiyah decided to run a relief mission in Cox's Bazar due to the demand of both Indonesian Muslims and the international communities while waiting for the result of the diplomatic meeting between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia and the Myanmar government.

It should be noted that the presence of Muhammadiyah in overseas relief missions is not in its infancy. This organisation already raised funds and sent their humanitarian teams for other disaster relief and development programmes in neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines and Thailand, as well as in disaster-affected countries such as Nepal and Palestine (West Bank and Gaza). Witnessing humanitarian crises caused by natural calamities and human-made disasters, both nationally and internationally, Muhammadiyah and other faith-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Indonesia, like in other countries, were stimulated to transform their types of activism. In the national context, natural calamities occurred frequently. Food shortages due to the long-term drought or massive deluges and other natural disasters that hit certain areas in Indonesia have motivated civil society organisations, together with government agencies, to be involved in humanitarian missions.

The most notable humanitarian crises in Indonesian history were the deadly impact of the earthquake and tsunami that hit the coastal areas of Aceh and Nias Island in 2004. Afterwards, earthquake and Mount Merapi eruptions paralysed the city of Yogyakarta for some time in 2006 and 2010, respectively. Just recently, in 2018, earthquake and liquefaction demolished Lombok Island (West Nusa Tenggara) and eradicated some coastal areas in Palu Central Celebes (Sulawesi). These humanitarian crises enthused NGOs in Indonesia, both religious and secular, to revitalise their function (Latief, 2013). In normal situations, some Muslim NGOs and civil society organisations in Indonesia worked on welfare projects by, among other things, providing various schemes to relieve the poor and run development projects. Yet once disasters took place in certain regions,

these NGOs operated relief and development projects in the disaster-affected spots. While working on welfare delivery and poor relief in the domestic context, Indonesian Muslim NGOs have also expanded their scope of operation by, among other things, becoming international NGOs working on relief and humanitarian missions overseas, such as Mer-C, ACT (Quick Response Action) and the PKPU Initiative. Muslim NGOs and philanthropy organisations, in particular, have also found a significant development in terms of the numbers as well as the scope of operation. These NGOs have addressed a wide range of issues such as welfare, poverty alleviation, human rights, peace, environment, and humanitarian crises for decades (Aoki, 2016; Latief, 2013).

The internationally uncertain geopolitical context provides a setting within which developing countries in the world were easily triggered to start the inter-state conflicts. In turn, some conflicting countries fell into severe humanitarian crises, such as occurred in Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Yemen, and Syria. Beyond all the debates among observers that conflicts in the Middle East were fuelled and escalated by the proxy wars between countries such as the United States, Russia, and others (Cragin, 2015; Hughes, 2014), some Muslim countries attempted to participate in reducing the impact of the crises by delivering aid in the form of “long-term development assistance as well as disaster relief” (De Cordier, 2009: 609). The mobilisations of humanitarian funds were organised in many places. For the most part, philanthropic funds for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance originated from the traditional giving of Islam, such as *zakat* (almsgiving) and *sadaqa* (voluntary giving) (Benthall, 2016). *Zakat* is mandatory for every Muslim whose wealth, including income and saved money, reached the minimum *zakatable* amount, equivalent to 85 g of gold, or 552 kg of rice or wheat during the harvest. The ulama or Islamic scholars, have various versions of the amount of wealth to be subjected to *zakat* (Islamic tax).

Although the involvement of the Indonesian Islamic civil society organisations took place as early as the 1960s and 1970s (Latief, 2012), a few attempts have been made by observers to explore the recent development of international relief projects and political missions overseas run by Indonesian civil society organisations. Some Indonesian NGOs, such as the Indonesian Red Crescent (*Bulan Sabit Merah Indonesia*), Mer-C, PKPU Initiative, ACT, and Dompot Dhuafa, have played profound roles in disaster relief and development overseas, such as establishing clinics and hospitals, schools, and clean water and sanitation in the disaster-affected areas (Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Myanmar, etc). It should be noted that some humanitarian NGOs also give political support to Muslim countries affected by the conflict (Taqwa and Zuhdi, 2016).

This article takes a closer look at the roles played by Muhammadiyah as an Islamic civil society organisation and how this organisation formulates new *ijtihad* (Islamic legal reasoning) by promoting “progressive Islam” or “Islam with progress” (*Islam Berkemajuan*). The article deals with how *ijtihad* is materialised in the Muhammadiyah engagement in international politics by addressing issues such as conflict resolution and humanitarian missions. *Ijtihad* (Arabic) can mean “independent reasoning” or “intellectual exercises” conducted by Muslim scholars (*‘ulama*) to discover new ideas or justify new actions which were not sufficiently discussed in major Islamic sources, such as the

Qur'an, hadith (prophetic narratives), and previous Islamic scholarship. Therefore, *ijtihad* is also related to Islamic renewalism (*tajdid*). To foster the practice of *ijtihad*, Muslim scholars utilised various method of Islamic legal thinking, including “analogical reasoning” (*qiyas*).

The involvement of Muhammadiyah in the international arena is a reflection of this Islamic modernist movement in reframing and materialising its religious views to be contextual with the needs of a global society. Endeavours to promote Indonesian Islam to the international communities and other parts of the Muslim world have begun with different strategies. Muhammadiyah, as the largest Muslim modernist group in Indonesia, has attempted to reinterpret and contextualise its organisational vision, develop its new formula of Islamic activism, as well as to expand its influence and function in the global arena. Exploring the reason why Islamic civil society organisations such as Muhammadiyah and other Indonesian faith-based humanitarian organisations operated overseas is an interesting topic to discuss.

## **Redefining Islamic Modernism and Discovering New *Ijtihad***

Founded and growing in a small town of Yogyakarta, Muhammadiyah has rapidly developed and increasingly become one of the largest Islamic civil society movements in Indonesia. Over one century it has coped with diverse political contexts, ranging from the Dutch colonialism and Japanese Occupation to the post-Independence and Reformasi era. Muhammadiyah's core activities deal with various projects, notably education, welfare, and healthcare, throughout Indonesia (Fuad, 2004; Latief, 2010). The modernist ideas of Islam influence Muhammadiyah's religious orientation. Since the early twentieth century, notions of Islamic modernism have profoundly influenced the nature of Islam in Southeast Asian regions, especially Indonesia.

The advocates of Islamic modernism are mainly urban individuals, the Muslim middle class, and educated people who have attempted to synthesise Islamic teachings and modernity (Noer, 1973). The Muhammadiyah can be regarded as the first Islamic association that extensively engaged in welfare-oriented activities through modern social and educational institutions. Influenced by such modernist Muslim thinkers and theologians as Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida, the Muhammadiyah was at the forefront of the campaign to promote Islamic modernism in Indonesia. Like its Christian counterparts at that time, the Muhammadiyah acted as a service provider in the social and health sectors. In the first two decades of its establishment, the Muhammadiyah movement was able to run mosques, schools, orphanages, and clinics to cater to communities, especially the poor. Until the 1960s, the Muhammadiyah's social engagement in public life was considered progressive, in that this association had implemented a “modern” way of translating Islamic precepts.

The spread of the modernist ideology in the twentieth century and the Muslim reformists' active engagement in translating Islam in the Indonesian context have drawn scholars' attention. The arguments proposed by observers mainly concern how the modernists played pivotal roles in shaping Indonesian Islam in the mid-twentieth century, as well as

in developing new types of Islamic education, models of social actions, and modernising Islamic precepts (Saleh, 2001). For example, Michael Feener notes that Muhammadiyah has promoted “a Salafi vision” by emphasising “the rationality of Islam” while at the same time endorsing the practice of *ijtihad* (Feener, 2007). Meanwhile, Azyumardi Azra suggests that Muhammadiyah’s ideology represents “Moderate Salafism” (*salafiya al-washatiyya*) which differs from the Salafi movements initiated by Ibn Taymiyyah, Abdul Wahhab, and Muhammad Abduh. Furthermore, Azra notes that the modernists have applied various approaches and methods: “Ibn Taymiyyah tends to be a polemist, Abdul Wahhab often uses violence, and Muhammad Abduh holds rationalistic approach” (*Republika*, 13 October 2005). In line with this, Howard M. Federspiel, in his studies of Islamic modernism, has called Muhammadiyah “an orthodox Islamic movement,” a term that is rarely used by other scholars (Federspiel, 1970). Similarly, Mitsuo Nakamura emphasises that Muhammadiyah is an “orthodox Islam in the form of a reformist movement” (Nakamura, 2011; Nasir, 2015). This article, however, will go beyond the approach formulated by the scholars above. It addresses the increasing public visibility and the development of Islamic humanitarian associations, with their modernist framework, in Indonesia, which in fact have become a sign of a new trend that has motivated Indonesian Muslims to be better acquainted with welfare issues, especially when they consider the state as being rather ineffective in providing an adequate welfare system.

Muslim social activists in the Muhammadiyah movement believe that they should revitalise their social function, as the country and society are vulnerable to both economic and natural crises. Portraying the dynamic development of Islamic social activism in contemporary Indonesia, this article examines how notions of Islamic modernism are reiterated, translated, and contextualised within the Muhammadiyah movement. In particular, it explores how Muslim intellectuals and social activists are altering the Islamic faith and how intellectual discourse among Muhammadiyah’s key personalities over the past three decades has underpinned the current global Muhammadiyah movement in the social and humanitarian fields.

While it is true that the modernist religious orientation has been characterised by the ideology of “purification” of religion, it should also be noted that there has been a new reading of Islam developed by the modernists. In presenting the nature of the Muslim modernist movement in contemporary Indonesia, we would like to begin with the story about the Muhammadiyah’s Muktamar (National Congress) which was held in Yogyakarta in 2010. Muktamar is a forum at which some issues about the future of the Muhammadiyah movement were discussed. We can observe how new ideas were framed by Muhammadiyah to sharpen its perspective in conceptualising Islam, in both national and international contexts. During the 43rd National Congress held in 2010, Muhammadiyah issued an important document called the “Centennial Statement of Muhammadiyah” (*Zhawâhir al-Afkâr al-Muhammadiyah li al-Qarni al-Tsâni*). Some notions of Islam were formulated in the above document to define the nature and future of the Muhammadiyah movement. The Muktamar emphasises that the concept of *dakwah* (Islamic propagation) and *tajdid* (Islamic renewal) should be understood as a way to achieve the progress of kind human. Islam is and should be seen as a religion with

progressive ideas suitable for the future of civilization (*din al-hadlarah*), whose presence will and should benefit the universe as a whole. With this view, according to this document, Islam would become a broader umbrella to protect the diversity of nations, races, ethnicities, and cultures of human beings (The Central Board of Muhammadiyah, 2010: 7). Another point of the Centennial Statement refers to the nature of “Islamic cosmopolitanism,” which means that “Muhammadiyah should function as a bridge to facilitate the dialogues between Islam and the West and the cooperation among civilizations.” The new world order, as stated in this document, needs dialogue, cooperation, alliance, and co-existence between civilizations (The Central Board of Muhammadiyah, 2010: 13).

The above views turn out to be an essential philosophical foundation for the Muhammadiyah movement in proposing new models of activism, including in addressing international issues such as conflicts, wars, and humanitarian crises. There was also a strong expectation among thousands of the Muktamar participants that Muhammadiyah should expand its missions and influences. Muhammadiyah might address local affairs such as poverty, welfare, socio-economic injustice, and *dakwah* (religious propagation) in the national context, but it also must be aware of international issues, including humanitarian missions, human rights, conflict resolution, peacebuilding and religious pluralism (The Central Board of Muhammadiyah, 2015), governments, organisations and individual. The increasing numbers of the proposals to broaden the role of Muhammadiyah in the international arena during the Muktamar indicate that there has been new awareness and confidence among Muhammadiyah members, especially the elites, to dynamically reinterpret and re-contextualise ideas of Islamic modernism in the national and international contexts.

Discourse on the internationalisation of the Muhammadiyah movement continued in the 44th Muktamar held in Makassar-South Celebes in August 2015. At that juncture, the participants discussed, debated, and toned down the proposed drafts of materials before they finally accepted and officially approved the drafts as a reference for the upcoming Muhammadiyah administration (2015–2020). Apart from discussing the organisational management, such as how to improve human resources and organisations in all (provincial and district) levels of leadership, the Muktamar approved three main issues.

The first issue deals with Muhammadiyah’s acceptance of Pancasila (the state ideology). In a document (which combined Indonesian and Arabic words) entitled “The Pancasila State as a [National] Consensus and a Place to Testify” (*Negara Pancasila sebagai Dar al-Ahdi wa al-Syahadah*), Muhammadiyah attempts to attach both spiritual and political interpretation into Pancasila. Muhammadiyah declares that it is committed to supporting Pancasila as a state ideology, promoting nationalism, and urging Indonesian Muslims to consistently implement the essence and values of Pancasila in the social, economic, and political spheres. The document of *Negara Pancasila* also emphasises that Islam has shared similarities with Pancasila, and therefore there would be no more objection among Muslims, especially among the Muhammadiyah members, to the Pancasila and its contents (The Central Board of Muhammadiyah, 2015: 58–71).

The second issue is about the Community-based Enlightening Dakwah Model (*Model Dakwah Pencerahan Berbasis Komunitas*). This document reflects a new Muhammadiyah approach to *dakwah* and how to contextualise Islam among different classes of the Indonesian society, ranging from the upper–middle class to underprivileged groups. The objective of the community-based *dakwah* is to reinforce the role and function of Muhammadiyah in the community as well as to strengthen the Islamic civil society, to promote *maslahah* (welfare and betterment of society), as well as to revitalise the ummah position in front of the state. According to this document, there are five types of communities that need different *dakwah* approaches: upper-middle class, middle class, lower-middle class, marginalised groups or “peripheral society” (migrant workers, unskilled labourers, street children, beggars, prostitutes, etc.), virtual communities (Facebookers, Twitterers, bloggers, etc.), and specified groups (socialites, muallaf, motorists, LGBT, etc.) (The Central Board of Muhammadiyah, 2015: 74–110).

The third one is named Muhammadiyah and Strategic Issues on the Islamic Society, Nationalism, and Humanity (*Muhammadiyah dan Isu-isu Strategis Keumatan, Kebangsaan, dan Kemanusiaan Universal*). The document shows how Muhammadiyah attempts to preserve its nature as a pillar of Islamic society in Indonesia by promoting the moderation of Islam, forbidding and avoiding *takfir* (the practice of ex-communication by, for example, declaring another Muslim a *kafir* [apostate]), as well as fostering religious tolerance and intensified dialogues between Sunni and Shi’a. Other strategic issues on nation and humanity include how to develop human resources, protect *disables* (different-ability or people with disabilities), defend minority groups, run relief and humanitarian action, evacuate displaced persons or refugees, and prevent and combat human trafficking (The Central Board of Muhammadiyah, 2015: 112–126).

The above narratives show how the modernist platform changed over time and was influenced by the emerging discourse among Muhammadiyah activists and intellectuals. In other words, intellectualism in Muhammadiyah has had a profound impact on the nature of Muhammadiyah’s social activism. Muslim thinkers, social activists, and political ideologists have tried to propose particular Islamic concepts to deal with social, economic, and political issues in modern nation-states. Keeping the political dynamics and socio-economic situation in Indonesia from the late 1960s until the mid-1980s in mind, social activists became increasingly concerned about questions of welfare and justice.

Attempts to promote Muhammadiyah’s formulation of Islam with a more inclusive vision are also reflected in the voices of some Muhammadiyah top leaders, such as Ahmad Syafii Maarif and Sirodjuddin (Din) Syamsuddin, who chaired Muhammadiyah from 1998 to 2005 and 2005–2015, respectively. In 2003, Syafii Maarif founded the Syafii Maarif Foundation, which sponsored the establishment of the Maarif Institute (MI), a non-profit organisation that functions as a ‘think tank’ organisation. The Maarif Institute is concerned with such issues as democracy, good governance, religious pluralism, poverty eradication, and human rights (Muwahhidah and Baidhowy, 2007). It aims to foster democracy in Indonesia by strengthening and expanding the participation of the civil society in advocating public policies (Latief, 2009). Syafi’i Maarif is also renowned



as one of the Islamic leaders who are very much concerned about interfaith dialogue and often raised his voice to defend minority groups. Syafii Maarif emphasises:

The leaders of this umat, therefore, must always be deeply aware of the need to improve its conditions if we truly want to see the future of Indonesia on the side of Islam. If it is to succeed, Islam must be understood as an Islam that shelters and protects all people. Minority groups must feel safe and at peace living in Indonesia because they are treated fairly and as true fellow citizens and patriots. Their rights must be fully guaranteed, with no discrimination. (Maarif, 2018: 225).

A similar effort to redefine Islamic modernism is also expressed in the efforts of another Muhammadiyah leader, Din Syamsuddin, who was elected as the President of Muhammadiyah in 2005–2010 and re-elected for the 2010–2015 term. In the past ten years, besides his involvement in Muhammadiyah, Din Syamsuddin has become a leading personality in interfaith dialogue. He founded the Center for Dialogue and Cooperation among Civilization (CDCC) in 2007. The CDCC's mission is "to provide advice and assistance to governments, organisations and individual decision-makers regarding the urgency of dialogue and cooperation among civilizations as models for building resolution for political, social, economic, cultural, security, and environmental problems" (<https://cdcc.or.id/profile/>). In recent times, the CDCC has played a profound role in organising and conducting interfaith forums by inviting religious leaders and facilitating interfaith dialogues, both nationally and internationally. Under Syamsuddin's leadership, Muhammadiyah's engagement in interfaith forums and peace talks became increasingly visible. Din Syamsuddin has continued the legacy that Muhammadiyah left and developed in the international arena.

Both Syafii Maarif and Din Syamsuddin have profoundly contributed to the internationalisation of Muhammadiyah in Post-New Order Indonesia. Muhammadiyah received international exposure and gained recognition from the international community and partners because the two Muhammadiyah leaders have seriously promoted notions of humanities, moderation, peace, and religious dialogues in both the Indonesian and global contexts. In 2008, Ahmad Syafii Maarif received the Magsaysay Award for Peace and International Understanding from the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation (RMAF). Syafii Maarif's notions of – and dedication to the promotion of – pluralism, peace, inter-religious dialogues, and democracy were regarded as a genuine contribution needed in the plural society of Indonesia at that time. Likewise, Din Syamsuddin, Syafii's successor in the Muhammadiyah leadership, was awarded the Japanese government's Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star by Akihito Emperor in Tokyo in 2018. Before that, Din had received the Japanese Foreign Minister's Commendation Award for his contribution to accelerating interfaith dialogue as well as for chairing the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace (ACRP), a Tokyo-based interfaith dialogue forum.

During the leadership of Syafii Maarif and Din Syamsuddin, Muhammadiyah established three institutions as supporting units: the Zakat Board of Muhammadiyah (LAZISMU); the Council of Community Empowerment (MPM); and the Muhammadiyah

Disaster Management Centre (MDMC). These three supporting units have contributed a lot to internationalising the Muhammadiyah movement. LAZISMU acts as fund collector and manager whose duty is mainly to raise funds from various sources. It is an official Muhammadiyah zakat agency that was legalised and accredited by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as one of the national zakat agencies. In distributing the collected funds, LAZISMU has struck up a partnership with different agencies or organisations, both internally and externally. Internally, LAZISMU has become one of the financial sources of MDMC (Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center) in disaster relief. The cooperation has been in place for many years to handle humanitarian missions in Indonesia and overseas. Likewise, LAZISMU has become primarily supported by the Council of Community Empowerment (MPM) to run various development projects in Indonesia, including in the isolated islands or remote areas. While locally Muhammadiyah remains active, engaging in different development and welfare-oriented programmes at the grassroots level, it appears that efforts to seek international recognition and exposure have increased. Muhammadiyah has addressed various issues in its engagement in the global communities, such as peace and reconciliation, conflict resolution, and disaster relief.

The establishment of organisational divisions working on philanthropy (LAZISMU), empowerment project (MPM), and disaster relief (MDMC) has energised and accelerated Muhammadiyah's roles in the international arena. These three divisions have dynamically interacted and made a partnership with other faith-based humanitarian NGOs, both nationally and internationally. Thus, Muhammadiyah has witnessed a shift in the character of the movement as the above divisions have shaped the nature of Muhammadiyah movement in line with the nature of humanitarian NGOs at large (Baidhaw, 2015; Bush, 2015; Roqib, 2012). Although motivated by religious teachings, the ethical dimension of how to deliver aid and the codes of conduct of the humanitarian mission, as well as how to translate humanitarian principles, are gradually implemented. The Muhammadiyah seeks the similarities between Islamic concept of humanitarianism and the internationally recognised humanitarian principles, such as what faith-based humanitarian NGOs somewhere else in the Muslim world and in the West have accomplished (Mohamed and Ofteringer, 2015).

In 2006, Muhammadiyah, with the support of Australian Aid (AusAID) (Baidhaw, 2015; CDASC, 2006), organised a project called Child Disaster Awareness for Schools and Communities (CDASC). This project aimed at introducing, building, and improving disaster awareness in Muhammadiyah schools (CDASC, 2007). It was extensive, covering even earthquake-ravaged regions such as Padang (West Sumatra), Bengkulu (Sumatra), dan Garut (West Java). The scope then grew, and Muhammadiyah set up a new division called the Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center (MDMC) in 2008. The Center's primary duties are developing institutional capacity and networking skills among Muhammadiyah members as a way of reducing and managing disaster risks and running emergency relief. Since then, Muhammadiyah, through the MDMC, has run hundreds of relief missions in many disaster-affected areas in Indonesia (Baidhaw, 2015).

As Muhammadiyah has managed hundreds of hospitals throughout Indonesia, the MDMC projects gained the support of the Muhammadiyah-Aisyiyah hospitals and higher educational institutions, notably the nursing schools and the faculties of medical sciences and engineering at the Muhammadiyah universities. Therefore, the MDMC not only became a vibrant centre for young social activists, but also a centre with the full support of the medical doctors and nurses working in Muhammadiyah hospitals. As the humanitarian unit of the Muhammadiyah movement, the MDMC has emerged as a professional organisation which upholds the principles of humanitarian conducts and established partnerships with other faith-based humanitarian groups regardless of their religious backgrounds. MDMC has assisted not only victims of disaster but also displaced persons, among them minority groups such as the Shi'ites and Ahmadiyah (Latief, 2016: 278–279). Pertaining to Muhammadiyah's experiences in disaster relief, Robin Bush notes, "not only was Muhammadiyah a deft political player in terms of the intra-Islamic dynamics and domestic politics of the post-disaster context in Aceh, it was also an agile and sophisticated partner for international agencies negotiating the politics of aid in Aceh" (Bush, 2015: 11).

As a continuum of the entire process of Muhammadiyah engagement in a humanitarian mission, in 2015, Muhammadiyah produced a special book entitled *Fikih Kebencanaan (Fiqh/Islamic Jurisprudence on Disaster Issues)*, in which Muhammadiyah provides a philosophical and religious foundation to perceive and understand both human-made and natural disasters from an Islamic viewpoint. The publication of this book in both the Indonesian and English languages has led Muhammadiyah to a new stage on how to introduce the Islamic concept of a humanitarian mission to the international communities. The publication of *Fiqh on Disaster* symbolises a collective effort among the Muhammadiyah leaders to reshape its religious views on contemporary issues. *Fiqh on Disaster* is a conceptual framework formulated by Muhammadiyah to reconcile the normative understanding of Islamic concepts of disaster and contemporary understanding in the international communities. This book, which was published in 2016, aims at giving understanding among Muhammadiyah members about what disasters mean and how Muslims should understand disasters from an Islamic theological perspective. This book becomes a handbook for all Muhammadiyah volunteers who go to work in disaster-affected spots, as well as for the victims. One of the important topics relevant to the issues of the humanitarian mission is the fulfilment of the victims' needs living in disaster-affected areas. By referring to some sources in the Qur'an, hadith (prophetic narratives), and contemporary documents on disaster relief, this book emphasises that Islamic teachings endorsed professionalism for all the volunteers to accurately and actively deliver aid to protect the dignity of the victims. It suggests that "humanitarian volunteers were encouraged to treat all the victims equally and justly when delivering humanitarian assistance." According to the Muhammadiyah's *Fiqh on Disaster*, Islam fosters equal rights, freedom of religions, and the right to live (Majelis Tarjih and Tajdid, 2016: 96).

## **International Exposure: Conflict Resolution and Disaster Relief**

Enthusiasm to be part of the international player in disaster relief increases in the Muslim world. Some Muslim countries have now even become- as observers have noted- “non-traditional donors,” which has energised the flow of global aid for humanitarianism in the (Muslim) countries affected by disasters (Tittensor et al., 2018). The vibrant engagement of Indonesian Islamic civil society organisations, such as Muhammadiyah, in the international arena, especially in disaster relief and conflict resolution projects, can be scrutinised from the lens of the international NGO sector. The participation of Muslim NGOs in international relief, in fact, is not a new phenomenon. In recent times, NGOs working on development and humanitarianism founded and funded by Muslim communities have witnessed unprecedented growth, not only in the Middle East, Africa (Ahmed, 2009; Benthall et al., 2003; Harmsen, 2008), and the West (Smith and Filipiak, 2007), but also in Asia (Nejima, 2016). Muslim NGOs, like other faith-based NGOs within Christian and Buddhist societies (Thaut, 2009), have become essential players in the international aid system (Benthall, 2016). The role of religious NGOs in foreign humanitarian missions and political context remains a challenging issue. As noted by (Tønnessen, 2007: 325), “International aid is just as much an arena for religiously based tensions and conflict as international politics is. Religious NGOs can feed conflicts at local, national and international levels, just as they can be instruments of conflict resolution and peace.”

Religions and religious groups in many parts of the world have been involved in conflictual violent actions, but at the same time, they can become agents of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Attempts have been made religious actors to become “religious peacemaker” in many countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (Haynes, 2009; Smock, 2001). Haynes, studies on religious actors, whether among Muslims, Christians, or Buddhists, in peacebuilding in Mozambique, Nigeria, and Cambodia suggest that religious actors can contribute to and accelerate the peace-making process. Meanwhile, in a conflict situation, religious actors were also faced with delicate issues, such as identities, impartiality and neutrality in humanitarian missions. Therefore, observers pay a lot of attention to the “cultural proximities” in international political aid (Benthall et al., 2003). In this respect, Muhammadiyah attempts to follow the path of other international faith-based NGOs that have been globalised and have actively run humanitarian projects worldwide, such as IIRO, Christian Aid, World Vision, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Muslim Aid, and so forth.

Muhammadiyah’s attempts to seek international exposure are expressed in different ways. It selects and addresses specific issues, such as peace, conflict resolution, and humanitarian activities. The issues chosen by Muhammadiyah in defining its engagement in the international arena are often in line with Muhammadiyah’s standards of activism, which pay much attention to welfare-oriented activities. There are three cases that this article would like to highlight in a bid to analyse how the process of internationalisation has taken place in Muhammadiyah. The first is Muhammadiyah’s engagement in peace talks in Mindanao (Bangsamoro), the second is the reconciliation project in

southern Thailand, and the third is Muhammadiyah's international humanitarian mission in Nepal and Bangladesh. By looking closer at these three cases, we may see how Muhammadiyah's *ijtihad* has been formulated in a new way as a continuum, as well as an innovation of its models of *ijtihad* in the past.

The way Muhammadiyah and its humanitarian agencies selected cases for its international missions is interesting to explore. As mentioned previously, Muhammadiyah considers the conflict involving Muslim communities, especially in Southeast Asia, as the spots to express its international engagement, such as the conflicts and violence taking in Southern Thailand and the Philippines. For many years, these two countries have witnessed the escalation of violence and armed conflicts between the government and Muslim communities that requested independence. Competing identities and discourse among Malay-Muslims and the Thai government have characterised insurgency in the provinces such as Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala (Jory, 2007, 2013; Yusuf, 2007). Likewise, armed conflict involving Muslims in Mindanao has coloured the Philippine's political history for decades. Although the "rebels" and the government in these two countries somehow halt the armed conflict, crises stimulated by domestic political context can happen anytime.

During the tenure of Din Syamsuddin, Muhammadiyah began to engage with conflict issues in southern Thailand, especially in Pattani and Yala provinces. Muhammadiyah leaders communicated with the Thai government and Muslim leaders in southern Thailand in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As one of the largest Islamic civil society organisations in Indonesia, the Muhammadiyah movement was probably known by Thai Muslims in southern Thailand provinces, and thus Muhammadiyah could play its diplomatic roles by establishing communication with both government and Muslim society organisations in southern Thailand. The Muhammadiyah president, Din Syamsuddin, took the initiative to implement the Muhammadiyah model of diplomacy in the case of insurgency in southern parts of Thailand. After his visit to Thailand in 2006, Din Syamsuddin claimed that King Bhumipol asked him "to foster Muhammadiyah engagement in helping the Thai government to resolve and end the conflict in southern Thailand." Din Syamsuddin's effort to bring Muhammadiyah into international politics by involving it in peace-making or conflict resolution represents the power that civil society and NGOs can play. It is very often the case that the government in the neighbouring countries show their reluctance to engage because each country has shared similar problems, such as separatism, terrorism, violence, and communal conflicts. Therefore, NGOs and civil society can have wider opportunities to be part of the conflict resolution process in the neighbouring countries, such as delivering aid, sending facilitators for interfaith dialogue, and people-to-people partnership, about which the government has limited resources.

Din's diplomatic step in engaging Thai Muslim issues was backed up by the Muhammadiyah education institutions. Din argued that one strategic way that Muhammadiyah can play a part is through educational projects. Muhammadiyah has the capacity to host hundreds of students from southern Thailand to study at Muhammadiyah universities in Indonesia.

I believe that more of these dialogues are needed. More exchanges of views and discussions among civilizations should be encouraged. Therefore, we should continue to make the dialogue among civilizations useful both at the elite and grassroots level. We should ensure that various activities to bridge the gap among civilizations would contribute to the enhancement of mutual understanding and respect in a concrete way.

Mediation through interfaith dialogues would not be meaningful unless parties to such dialogues can articulate their points of view in a frank and candid manner. Dialogues would quickly turn into a political theatre if we cannot be honest with each other. Fruitful dialogues could only be achieved in an environment that promotes candidness and honesty within a spirit of togetherness and brotherhood. Faith-based organizations, like Muhammadiyah, whenever possible, can and should play a role in mediation effort to resolve conflict. We have played and will continue to play that role at the community level. We have also played that role to bridge differences among communities at the national level. (Syamsuddin, 2016: 8)

To implement his vision, Din Syamsuddin brought some rectors from Muhammadiyah universities to Pattani and Yala provinces to talk with the local leaders and established a future partnership with the Thai government for this peace mission. As a result, in 2008, Muhammadiyah, in collaboration with the Thailand government, invited the Pattani communities to pursue their studies in Muhammadiyah universities. Until 2012, there were forty-four Pattani students admitted to various Muhammadiyah universities in a wide range of departments (English Language, International Relations, Arabic, Islamic Studies, Economics, and Dentistry). This project was politically under the support of the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) of Thailand.

Muhammadiyah was actively engaged in peace talks between the Philippines government and Bangsamoro. The tensions between the Manila and Mindanao escalated many times in the Philippines, and Muhammadiyah was one of the third parties invited by the Philippines government to adopt soft power and a diplomatic approach to this case. Dr. Sudibyo Markus, the vice Chairman of Muhammadiyah at that time (2005–2010), was among Muhammadiyah's delegation in the peace talks which were held either in the Philippines or other countries (Bush, 2015). The frustration of both the Philippines government and Bangsamoro in resolving the problems and seeking a suitable strategy for conflict resolution in the region encouraged them to involve third parties, including Muhammadiyah. Representing Muhammadiyah, Din Syamsuddin and Sudibyo Markus, along with other personalities from different countries- such as Masahiko Horie (Japanese Ambassador to Malaysia), Boyd McCleary (British High Commissioner to Malaysia), Yasin Temizkan (Turkish Chargé d'Affaires), Steven Rood and Herizal Hazri (the Asia Foundation), Cynthia Petrigh and Kristián Herbolzheimer (Conciliation Resources), and David Gorman (the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue)- constituted the International Contact Group (ICG). The ICG served as a peace platform between the Philippines government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The ICG was founded on 16 November 2009 in Kuala Lumpur (Kraft, 2010).

Muhammadiyah also used a similar treatment and approach for the Muslim communities in Mindanao. Muhammadiyah provides a full scholarship for students from Mindanao to pursue their advanced studies at Muhammadiyah higher educational institutions. As the Muhammadiyah President at that time, Din Syamsuddin explained that the participation of Muhammadiyah in providing special scholarships for hundreds of students from some provinces in southern Thailand and Mindanao is a continuum of the peace process. This process was fostered by both the Thailand and Philippine government and Muslim groups from the two countries. For Din, Muhammadiyah's reception to Pattani and Mindanao students is part of the brotherhood: "Muhammadiyah responsibility and care to the Muslim brothers in Pattani." Din Syamsuddin also intensified Muhammadiyah's role in fostering a soft power approach in southern Thailand by inviting some religious leaders to participate in dialogues organised by the World Conference on Religions for Peace (WCRP) and the Asian Conference on Religions for Peace (ACRP) in which Din Syamsuddin acted as president of the Board representing Islam. Therefore, promoting peace and conducting humanitarian or relief activities became part of Muhammadiyah's main project for its international exposure. Beyond the above diplomatic and soft power approach adopted by Muhammadiyah during peace talks and reconciliation, humanitarian or relief missions in disaster-affected regions overseas have become Muhammadiyah's concern. It should be noted that Muhammadiyah's efforts to internationalise its mission continue during the Haedar Nashir leadership. Nashir was elected as the Muhammadiyah President in 2015 and he actively supports internationalisation programmes by publishing some documents and Muhammadiyah thought to be available in English.

Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta (UMY) is one of Muhammadiyah's higher educational institutions that became the place for Pattani and Mindanao students to pursue their studies. Gunawan Budiyanto, the Rector of the Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta, explains the reason why this university hosted and provided a scholarship for PhD students from Mindanao, both Christians and Muslim students. He argues:

Islam talks about humankind and humanity. The scholarship that we have provided for both Christian and Muslim students from Mindanao signifies our interpretation of the inclusiveness of the Qur'an, as well as our understanding of the concept of *rahmatan lil al-'alamin*. This means that Islam should be benefited by all human beings, especially the oppressed, regardless of race and religions. Humanitarian missions should have not only a 'legal standing', but also a 'social standing'. Which means that we have to understand the social landscape in Mindanao where Muslims and Christians are involved in conflicts. By inviting them to our campus to pursue their advanced studies, they will see and understand that Islam is a peaceful religion. Instead of introducing the Islamic values of humanity by preaching, we let them feel the values of Islamic humanity through their experiences in here. (Interview, 1 October 2019)

Concomitant with local dynamics in running humanitarian projects was the onset of Muhammadiyah's engagement in humanitarian missions overseas. In 2015,

Muhammadiyah was employed by the state-based humanitarian agency the National Disaster Management Body (BNPB), to run relief and humanitarian missions in Nepal. Some medical doctors, notably orthopaedic and anaesthetic doctors, and anaesthetic nurses, departed for Nepal together with other agencies from Indonesia, such as the Indonesian military medical team. The Muhammadiyah medical team who left for Nepal comprised medical doctors working in various Muhammadiyah hospitals such as Islamic Hospital Pondok Kopi (Jakarta), PKU Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta and PKU Muhammadiyah Bantul (Yogyakarta). This team was the first Muhammadiyah medical team to work on an overseas humanitarian project. Different reasons motivated the engagement of Muhammadiyah in humanitarian missions overseas. The Chairman of the MDMC, Budi Setiawan, suggests that the overseas mission symbolises Muhammadiyah's respect for humanity as well as signifies efforts to pay back foreign aid to Indonesia during the tsunami and earthquake disasters in Aceh and Yogyakarta in 2004 and 2006 respectively (Interview, 1 October 2019).

Another Muhammadiyah international humanitarian project was conducted in Bangladesh in response to the crises in the Rakhine state (Myanmar). With the support from the Muhammadiyah Philanthropy Board (LAZISMU) that collected zakat (alms-giving) and humanitarian donations from the public, Muhammadiyah sent a larger humanitarian team to Bangladesh. Twenty-three medical doctors were sent to provide medical assistance for refugees in Bangladesh. Apart from primary healthcare for women and children, Muhammadiyah provided food for the refugees. In Bangladesh, Muhammadiyah collaborated with both international and local NGOs. Rahmawati Husein, who became a volunteer in some Muhammadiyah's overseas humanitarian mission, says: "the objective of Muhammadiyah is helping others, regardless of race, ethnicity, and nationalities[...] and the meaning of engagement is not only helping but also knowledge sharing and partnership" (Interview, 30 September 2019).

The international engagement of Muhammadiyah in the global arena, such as in humanitarian missions and peace and reconciliation projects, has had an institutional consequence within the organisation. Many Muhammadiyah organisational divisions, such as the philanthropy division, empowerment division, humanitarian division and health care division, should be involved in the Muhammadiyah foreign missions. Some experts among Muhammadiyah activists were invited to handle different international projects. Therefore, the Central Board of Muhammadiyah issued a policy stating that all foreign missions should come under the umbrella of the Muhammadiyah-Aid. The presence of Muhammadiyah-Aid as the new flag of Muhammadiyah's international projects means a lot for this Islamic modernist movement. First, Muhammadiyah-Aid signifies the vibrant efforts of Muhammadiyah to strengthen its roles in the international arena. Second, Muhammadiyah, as an Indonesian Islamic movement, aims to declare the movement's readiness to be involved in international humanitarian missions to the public. Third, Muhammadiyah-Aid functions to promote the new trajectory of the Indonesian Islamic movement in the international arena to the international community.

It should be noted that it is not always easy for Muhammadiyah and other humanitarian organisations from Indonesia to undertake overseas projects. In practice,



Muhammadiyah has engaged other local humanitarian organisations as partners in overseas programmes. So far, Muhammadiyah has become a co-founder of the Indonesian Humanitarian Forum (HFI), a multi-religious platform for Indonesian humanitarian organisations. HFI was founded in the aftermath of Tsunami Aceh to reduce suspicions and mistrust in society, especially among Muslim communities regarding the involvement of non-Islamic humanitarian organisations, notably Christian NGOs, in many regions of Indonesia. HFI has emerged as a platform on which all major humanitarian organisations in Indonesia uphold the Indonesian humanitarian code of conduct.

In 2017, when the conflict in Myanmar caused more than 500,000 people of Rohingya to leave the Rakhine state to become refugees in Bangladesh, Muhammadiyah sent relief and medical teams to Bangladesh. This project was to last for about eight months, serving thousands of refugees. However, due to diplomatic difficulties and some other issues, Muhammadiyah halted the mission, as the Bangladesh government did not grant visas to the humanitarian teams. One of the reasons was that the Muhammadiyah medical teams did not have a license from the international agency to run humanitarian projects. The presence of the Indonesian President, Joko Widodo, and the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Cox's Bazar to the refugee camps in January 2018 did not improve the international diplomacy that would have allowed the Indonesian humanitarian organisations to provide humanitarian intervention (Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center (MDMC), 2018).

While the Muhammadiyah movement seeks international exposure through humanitarian missions and peace projects overseas, can Muhammadiyah, as an Indonesian Islamic civil society organisation, become one of the leading players in humanitarian and relief missions in the global community? So far, Muhammadiyah has been faced with many challenges on the domestic front, such as poverty, disaster, opposition to democracy, and radicalism, and a lot of energy is being spent in preserving its thousands of institutions, among which are schools, hospitals, universities, orphanages, banks, and so forth. In the global context, faith-based or Islamic organisations with specific roles to play in humanitarian issues have been operating extensively.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed the current interpretations of Islam among the Muslim modernists by looking at the experience of the Muhammadiyah movement, the most significant modernist Islamic civil society organisation in Indonesia. Muhammadiyah's involvement in various types of social activities, ranging from relief supplies to humanitarian missions in disaster-affected areas, signifies the preservation of the patterns of the ideological framework and reflects a contextual interpretation of Islam among Muslim modernists. While the modernist ideological agenda is promoting the "purity" of Islam by strictly adhering to the Qur'an and Sunna, there has been a dynamic discourse and vibrant social activism among Muhammadiyah activists, which eventually has led to the inclusive engagement of Muhammadiyah in humanitarian activities.

Some observers raised questions about the interest behind the flow of international aid in the Muslim world. Similar questions were also often addressed to faith-based NGOs working on humanitarian missions as to whether they can act as “humanitarian agents or missionaries of faith” (Tønnessen, 2007), and whether their aid is utilised for development projects or merely to support particular groups of people called “*ummah*” (Petersen, 2016). In recent times, local religious organisations have a broader opportunity to play their roles as agencies that operate internationally and carry out their diplomatic roles. Tønnessen (2007: 325) notes, “[...] religion came into play as a relevant factor in foreign politics, carrying the possibility to be an agent of war as well as of peace. Religious leaders were looked to in order to mobilise people for conflict resolution and peace. This was not new, but optimism about the constructive role of religion in conflict resolution seems to have been growing all the time since then, and has made it more legitimate to activate religion within the political realm.”

The challenges and opportunities – the social, economic, and political systems – in Indonesia are continually changing. In particular, the neoliberal transformation of the economy has brought new problems, as large groups of society become further marginalised. This, in part, has motivated some Muhammadiyah activists to propose new discourse and to provide more effective means for Muhammadiyah members to improve their skills and capacity in dealing with empowerment issues. By defining new segments of what scholars have termed “politically (or structurally) underprivileged groups” and by framing the “development perspective” in the current grassroots-oriented social activism, the Muhammadiyah movement has undergone institutional transformations.

There has been an increasing awareness among some Muhammadiyah activists, as reflected in their discourse, that the attainment of public good in Indonesia’s social and political setting requires more energy and innovation. The term “empowerment” is rather political compared with “charitable actions.” Of course, to meet the current social, economic, and political challenges in Indonesia, a culturally and religiously diverse country, Muhammadiyah activists are responsible for reframing some critical concepts in Islam that relate to the promotion of public good and welfare. Beyond this, the role of Muhammadiyah in the international arena has increased in the past decades. Muhammadiyah has been able to contextualise its Islamic interpretation beyond normative views as it has engaged with broader issues such as peace, reconciliation, and humanitarian missions. Although Muhammadiyah has been limited in expanding its roles in the international arena, a robust and vibrant vision of its members, who are mostly well educated, will provide an opportunity to preserve and expand its international exposure. This is partly evident in current Muhammadiyah overseas projects, including the establishment of Islamic schools in some countries such as Egypt, Malaysia, and Australia.

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