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The Role of Islamic Social Movements in Indonesia's Democracy: Activism, Welfare, and Education

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ABSTRACT

Background. Customary law ('urf) plays a crucial role in shaping Islamic legal thought, particularly in traditional regions where local traditions intersect with Sharia principles. Historically, Islamic jurists have recognized the relevance of customary law in legal deliberations, particularly when it does not conflict with the fundamental texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Purpose. This study aims to analyze the integration of customary law within the Islamic legal framework, emphasizing its role in the formulation of legal decisions across time periods and schools of jurisprudence.

Methods. This study uses a qualitative research design with a case study approach to explore the role of Islamic social movements in shaping Indonesian democracy, particularly in the areas of activism, welfare, and education.

Results. The findings indicate that customary law not only serves as a complementary legal source but also contributes significantly to the contextualization and adaptability of Islamic legal norms across various communities. Furthermore, jurists from the Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafi'i schools have demonstrated varying degrees of acceptance of 'urf, reflecting a dynamic and pluralistic legal tradition.

Conclusion. In conclusion, the incorporation of customary law into Islamic jurisprudence underscores the flexibility and responsiveness of Islamic legal theory to local realities.

KEYWORDS

Customary Law, Islamic Jurisprudence, 'Urf, Legal Adaptation, Islamic Legal Sources

INTRODUCTION

Islamic social movements in Indonesia have played a vital role in shaping both civil society and political dynamics since the early 20th century. Emerging from the socio-religious reform currents of the colonial era, these movements evolved not only as expressions of religious piety but also as agents of social transformation. As

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Indonesia transitioned from authoritarianism to democracy, Islamic social movements redefined their strategies and expanded their domains of influence beyond traditional religious spheres.

The integration of Islamic activism into democratic processes reflects a unique blend of religious values and civic engagement. Rather than functioning as oppositional forces to state authority, many Islamic social organizations have chosen participatory models, engaging in elections, public policy, and advocacy. This participatory posture has increased their visibility in democratic forums and allowed them to assert influence in issues such as education reform, social justice, and poverty alleviation.

Current discussions on democratization in Indonesia frequently emphasize secular political actors, neglecting the substantial role of Islamic social movements in constructing democratic norms. This oversight limits the understanding of how religiously motivated activism can contribute to inclusive governance, pluralism, and socio-economic development (Polinsky, 2024; Tlemsani & Matthews, 2023). Highlighting these contributions is essential to grasping the full landscape of democratic consolidation in the Indonesian context.

Despite their visible presence, the role of Islamic social movements in Indonesia's democratic development remains under-explored in scholarly discourse. Existing research tends to isolate political Islam from broader democratic practices, leading to a dichotomous portrayal that views Islamic activism as either a threat or an alternative to democracy (Al-Obaid, 2024; Ali, 2024; Chanifah et al., 2024; Rifandanu & Febrianti, 2023). This reductionist view undermines the nuanced roles these movements play in fostering democratic resilience and community welfare.

Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and newer movements like PKS-affiliated groups have been actively involved in grassroots mobilization, civic education, and welfare provision. However, their multifaceted contributions are often framed in relation to identity politics or electoral behavior, rather than their institutional, normative, and service-based engagements (Abdelsalam, 2024; Almansoori et al., 2024; Ezzat, 2024). This skewed focus hampers a holistic understanding of their developmental and educational roles.

There is a pressing need to examine how these movements operate as civil society actors in a democratic setting, particularly in the fields of welfare and education. A more comprehensive inquiry should account for their strategic alignments, value orientations, and long-term societal goals (Azwar & Rinaldi, 2024; Nazari Tavakkoli & Ghadirzadeh Toosi, 2024; Omran et al., 2024). Addressing this gap is critical for evaluating the compatibility of religious activism with democratic values and state-building processes.

This study aims to analyze the contributions of Islamic social movements to Indonesia's democracy by focusing on three central domains: political activism, welfare services, and educational initiatives. It seeks to identify how these movements engage with democratic mechanisms while retaining their religious identity and organizational autonomy. The research will contextualize their actions within Indonesia's broader socio-political evolution.

The study also aims to uncover the institutional and discursive strategies employed by Islamic movements in negotiating their roles as both faith-based entities and democratic participants. Special attention will be given to how these organizations mediate between state policies and community needs, especially in times of social crises or political uncertainty. By doing so, the research intends to map their role in stabilizing democratic institutions through non-state channels.

A further objective is to assess how the educational programs and welfare infrastructures developed by Islamic social movements contribute to democratic citizenship. Through formal and non-formal education, these movements shape civic values, ethical awareness, and political literacy

(Embong et al., 2024; Gillett, 2023; Nobahar, 2024). Understanding this role will help explain how religiously motivated groups influence democratic culture and long-term societal cohesion.

Scholarly literature on democratization in Indonesia has primarily centered around party politics, state reforms, and secular civil society. While political Islam has been examined in terms of electoral behavior and legal reform, little attention has been paid to the constructive roles Islamic social movements play in democratic consolidation. This has led to a lack of nuanced analysis regarding their non-electoral contributions.

Previous studies often conflate Islamic movements with political Islam or Islamism, ignoring the heterogeneity of actors that operate within faith-inspired civic spaces. There is insufficient exploration of how these organizations construct alternative forms of public service delivery, civic education, and cultural discourse (Abu Al Houl et al., 2024; Al Harbi, 2023; Dwiono et al., 2024; Komath, 2024). The literature is also fragmented, with limited interdisciplinary dialogue between political science, religious studies, and development studies.

This research seeks to fill the theoretical and empirical void by presenting a multidimensional analysis of Islamic social movements that transcends the binaries of secular versus religious or democratic versus authoritarian. By focusing on welfare and education, the study aims to bring forward evidence of how religious movements can be both devout and democratic, normative and pragmatic, ideological and service-oriented.

This study offers a novel contribution by situating Islamic social movements at the intersection of religious identity and democratic engagement. Unlike previous works that treat Islam and democracy as competing frameworks, this research investigates their synergy, especially in the context of Indonesia's plural and decentralized society. The study presents Islamic activism as a potential democratizing force rather than a mere political reaction.

The originality of this research lies in its thematic triangulation of activism, welfare, and education—three domains that are rarely examined together in the context of Islamic social movements. It highlights how these spheres are interlinked and how they collectively sustain the legitimacy and societal trust that these movements enjoy. Such an approach expands the analytical scope and provides a richer, more integrated understanding.

By offering a grounded, context-sensitive perspective, this study responds to scholarly calls for de-Westernizing theories of democracy and civil society. It justifies the inclusion of religious movements as legitimate civic actors and challenges prevailing narratives that exclude them from democratic theory and practice. The findings of this study are expected to contribute not only to Indonesian studies but also to global debates on faith-based civil society and post-secular democracy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the role of Islamic social movements in shaping Indonesia's democracy, particularly in the areas of activism, welfare, and education. The case study method was chosen to allow an in-depth investigation of specific Islamic social organizations, their ideological frameworks, and the practical implications of their engagement with democratic processes (Agadirun et al., 2024; Muhsin et al., 2024). Emphasis was placed on understanding the contextual dynamics, narratives, and strategies these movements employ in their socio-political participation.

The population of this research includes Islamic social organizations in Indonesia that have been actively involved in democratic discourse and public service between 2010 and 2024. The

study purposively selected three prominent movements as samples: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and PKS-affiliated social institutions, based on their visible impact in the spheres of education and welfare, as well as their historical continuity in democratic activism.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field observations. Interviews were conducted with key figures, educators, activists, and policy analysts associated with the selected organizations. Official reports, educational curricula, community service documents, and public speeches were also examined to triangulate and validate data from interviews and field notes.

The research was conducted in four phases: identification and selection of case study subjects; development of interview guidelines and document analysis protocols; data collection through fieldwork in selected regions (e.g., Yogyakarta, Jakarta, and West Java); and finally, thematic data analysis using coding and categorization to interpret the role of Islamic movements in Indonesia's democratic practices. Ethical clearance and informed consent procedures were strictly observed throughout the research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research collected secondary data from organizational reports, government publications, and reputable news outlets, focusing on five major Islamic social movements in Indonesia: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, Persatuan Islam (Persis), Wahdah Islamiyah, and Al Irsyad. These movements were analyzed through three primary dimensions-activism, welfare programs, and educational institutions-across a five-year period (2019–2023).

The numerical data is used not as the central axis of the study but as a supplement to interpret qualitative themes drawn from document analysis, interviews with movement leaders, and content review of public communications. These data points serve as initial indicators to guide further thematic exploration in the activism, welfare, and education sectors.

The numbers reflect a strong concentration of resources and programs in NU and Muhammadiyah, both historically embedded in the socio-political fabric of Indonesian civil society. Their dominance is not only institutional but also symbolic, with deep roots in national history and mass mobilization traditions.

The data also suggest the presence of decentralized but purposeful action in smaller movements like Persis and Wahdah Islamiyah. While quantitatively smaller, their programs were found to be highly contextual, often responding directly to localized needs, which amplifies their relevance in their respective regions.

Field interviews with community organizers and leaders revealed that activism in Islamic movements is broadly defined. It ranges from mobilization during elections and policy discussions to civic education forums in mosques, pesantren, and schools. These movements often serve as bridges between grassroots populations and state authorities.

Welfare initiatives encompass health clinics, economic empowerment for women, child sponsorship, food banks, and housing rehabilitation. Education programs extend beyond formal schooling, including non-formal literacy, Qur'anic study groups, vocational training, and leadership development workshops for youth.

Narrative analysis from interviews reveals that Islamic movements do not merely fill service gaps left by the state. Rather, they reinterpret these gaps through theological and moral frameworks, positioning their services as acts of faith and social justice. This approach enhances community trust and legitimizes their involvement in the democratic process.

The inferential insight drawn is that democratic values—such as participation, accountability, and representation—are embedded in religious practices and social routines. These movements operate as "moral democrats," utilizing Islamic ethics to construct an inclusive yet principled mode of political engagement.

There exists a positive relationship between the scale of educational institutions and the depth of civic engagement activities. Movements with larger educational networks tend to have more developed programs for leadership training, public speaking, and critical thinking, which are essential for democratic awareness and participation.

Welfare delivery is closely tied to grassroots mobilization. Interviews indicated that social service provision often leads to political consciousness, especially when beneficiaries are involved in program planning or monitoring. This participatory welfare model blurs the line between aid and advocacy.

A case study of Muhammadiyah's "Aisyiyah" women's wing in Central Java revealed how gender-inclusive activism operates within an Islamic framework. Through its maternal clinics, early childhood education centers, and legal advocacy units, Aisyiyah not only promotes women's welfare but also trains women as civic leaders.

Another case is NU's LazisNU program in East Java, where zakat and infaq distribution are integrated with civic education. Beneficiaries were engaged in discussions on voting rights, social justice, and anti-corruption ethics during food distribution and health services, embedding democratic consciousness in charitable acts.

The case studies reinforce that Islamic movements are not politically dormant or ideologically rigid. Their actions represent adaptive strategies rooted in local realities and Islamic social teachings. Movements construct spaces of democratic participation within religious and moral boundaries.

Rather than confrontational activism, these organizations use service provision and community development as subtle tools of engagement with state and civic structures. This confirms their role as mediators, capable of fostering pluralism while retaining theological consistency.

Islamic social movements in Indonesia function as pivotal agents in the development of grassroots democracy. Their emphasis on ethical governance, community responsibility, and public education aligns closely with democratic values, albeit framed in religious terms.

The integration of activism, welfare, and education in their operations exemplifies a holistic model of civic engagement. These movements sustain democracy not through opposition, but through cultural embeddedness, moral authority, and participatory service.

The findings of this research revealed that Islamic social movements in Indonesia play a multifaceted role in supporting democratic practices through three major channels: grassroots activism, welfare provision, and educational initiatives. These movements serve as intermediaries between the state and society, mobilizing communities around issues such as social justice, religious identity, and public accountability. Activist wings of these movements have demonstrated consistent engagement in democratic processes such as elections, policy advocacy, and civic mobilization.

Data from interviews and document analysis also highlighted that Islamic organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah have institutionalized their efforts in welfare and education, operating thousands of schools, hospitals, and community programs that reach

underserved populations. These initiatives not only enhance social services but also instill democratic values such as inclusivity, civic responsibility, and participatory decision-making.

The role of women and youth in these movements also emerged as a significant element, particularly in fostering democratic literacy and ethical leadership within local communities. The findings showed how Islamic social movements leverage religious narratives to empower marginalized voices and challenge authoritarian tendencies at both national and local levels.

Overall, the study concluded that Islamic social movements in Indonesia are not merely religious entities but are dynamic civic actors that actively contribute to the consolidation and quality of democracy through structural and cultural engagement.

The findings resonate with existing literature that identifies Islamic civil society organizations as vital components of democratization in Muslim-majority contexts, especially in Southeast Asia. Scholars such as Robert Hefner and Mirjam Künkler have similarly underscored the civic capacities of Indonesia's Islamic movements, particularly in their commitment to pluralism and democracy.

Unlike research that focuses on radical or conservative factions, this study emphasizes mainstream Islamic movements that align with constitutional democracy and demonstrate pragmatic engagement with secular institutions. While prior studies have often highlighted the tensions between Islam and democracy, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of synergy rather than conflict.

A distinct contribution of this research is its attention to the structural role of Islamic social welfare and education programs as instruments for civic engagement, a dimension underexplored in previous analyses. This shows how democratic consolidation is not only about political participation but also about building resilient institutions and cultural frameworks that support democratic values.

Whereas other studies concentrate on elite political actors, this research shifts the focus to grassroots mobilization and its impact on everyday democratic practices. This angle reveals a more grounded and socially embedded narrative of democracy in the Indonesian Islamic context.

These findings suggest that Islamic social movements function as a critical mirror reflecting the intersection of faith, citizenship, and democratic ideals in Indonesian society. The presence of religiously inspired activism rooted in local communities signifies a broader transformation in the democratic imagination—one that integrates religious ethics with civic responsibility.

The data indicates that democratic values can be cultivated not only through secular channels but also through faith-based institutions that command deep legitimacy and moral authority among the populace. This counters the binary perspective that positions religion and democracy as inherently contradictory.

This research reflects an evolving pattern of civic religiosity in Indonesia, where Islamic values serve as both ethical resources and mobilizing tools in democratic life. Rather than retreating into religious exclusivism, these movements are expanding their influence by adapting to democratic norms and aligning them with Islamic teachings.

By acting as service providers and moral educators, Islamic movements also signal a redefinition of political engagement in Indonesia—not merely as contestation for state power but as a sustained commitment to social transformation through education, justice, and equity.

These findings have profound implications for democratic consolidation in Indonesia (Elmahjub, 2023; Niri et al., 2023; Siddiqui, 2024). The active involvement of Islamic social movements suggests that the future of Indonesian democracy will likely be shaped not only by formal political institutions but also by civil society organizations rooted in faith traditions.

Policy makers and democratic reformers need to engage with these movements as legitimate stakeholders in the democratic process. Ignoring their contributions may alienate a significant segment of the population that finds meaning and mobilization through religious frameworks.

For international development agencies and civil society networks, supporting the educational and welfare arms of Islamic movements could be a strategic investment in grassroots democracy and social cohesion. These organizations possess the local knowledge and trust needed to implement participatory development projects.

In the broader context of global Muslim societies, Indonesia offers a compelling model where Islamic identity and democratic norms are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing. This challenges dominant narratives that often link Islam to authoritarianism or political instability.

The outcomes can be traced to Indonesia's historical legacy of religious pluralism, Pancasila ideology, and a decentralized democratic system that provides room for civic religious actors to operate freely (Al Fozaie, 2023; Barseghyan & Kocharyan, 2024; Yurtseven, 2024). Islamic movements in Indonesia have evolved within a socio-political environment that encourages negotiation rather than confrontation.

Indonesia's post-reformasi era created institutional opportunities for Islamic organizations to formalize their role in governance, education, and welfare. These openings allowed movements like NU and Muhammadiyah to expand their civic agenda and influence policy-making processes.

The moral capital and organizational discipline of these movements, often rooted in pesantren traditions and community networks, also explain their ability to sustain long-term social programs and democratic engagement. Their deep social embeddedness gives them a comparative advantage in maintaining grassroots legitimacy.

Religious leaders within these movements have played an instrumental role in articulating an Islamic vision of democracy that resonates with local culture while remaining open to global democratic norms (Doğan & Ertemel, 2024; Mustapha et al., 2024). This theological flexibility has enabled them to navigate complex political landscapes.

Future research should explore how Islamic social movements adapt to digital transformation and the role of social media in shaping their democratic discourse. Investigating generational shifts in leadership and activism within these movements can also provide insights into their sustainability.

There is a need to examine the policy impact of these movements beyond education and welfare—particularly in areas such as environmental justice, gender equality, and economic empowerment. These themes represent emerging fields of engagement for many younger Islamic activists.

Stakeholders in the education sector should consider integrating civic education into the curricula of Islamic schools and pesantren, ensuring that future generations receive both religious and democratic literacy. Collaboration between the state and Islamic movements must be institutionalized through consultative frameworks.

In terms of policy, the government should recognize the strategic role of Islamic social movements in democratic development by offering support through inclusive partnerships, capacity-building programs, and legal protections that affirm their civic rights and responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Islamic social movements in Indonesia have played a multi-dimensional and evolving role in shaping democratic practices by fostering civic participation,

promoting social welfare initiatives, and advancing community-based education. Rather than positioning Islam solely within formal political structures, the findings demonstrate that Islamic activism operates through everyday social engagement, where religious values are translated into collective action and public service. Unlike prior research that has predominantly focused on political Islam or formal religious organizations, this study highlights the importance of grassroots initiatives and their deep embeddedness in daily democratic practices at the community level.

The findings further illustrate that activism rooted in Islamic ethical and moral values contributes significantly to participatory democracy. These movements actively mobilize communities around critical issues such as justice, social equity, poverty alleviation, and moral governance. In doing so, they not only strengthen civic awareness but also cultivate a sense of responsibility and solidarity among community members. This indicates that Islamic social movements function not merely as religious expressions, but also as important social institutions that help bridge gaps between citizens and the state, particularly in contexts where formal governance structures may be less responsive.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its conceptual integration of Islamic values with social movement theory and democratic participation frameworks. This synthesis offers a more nuanced and comprehensive analytical model for understanding how faith-based activism can operate as a transformative force within socio-political environments. Moreover, by situating religious activism within democratic theory, this study expands existing scholarship on civil society by demonstrating that religious identity can coexist with—and even strengthen—democratic engagement rather than undermine it.

Additionally, the qualitative approach employed in this study, particularly through in-depth case studies, allows for a rich and contextual interpretation of the interaction between religious identity and civic engagement. This methodological choice provides deeper insight into lived experiences, local dynamics, and the meanings attached to activism by participants themselves. As a result, the study enriches existing models of democratic agency by emphasizing context-specific practices and the importance of cultural and religious frameworks in shaping political participation.

However, this study is limited by its geographical and organizational scope, as it primarily focuses on urban-based Islamic movements in Java. This limitation suggests that the findings may not fully capture the diversity of Islamic social movements across Indonesia's broader socio-cultural landscape, particularly in rural areas or in regions with distinct historical trajectories of Islamic activism. Therefore, broader comparative research across different regions and among varying ideological strands within Islamic movements is necessary to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Future research should also explore the ongoing digital transformation of Islamic activism, particularly how online platforms reshape patterns of mobilization, communication, and identity formation among younger generations. In addition, further studies could examine the implications of digital activism for political literacy, intergroup dialogue, and pluralistic engagement within democratic discourse. Such directions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Islamic social movements continue to evolve in response to technological, social, and political change in contemporary Indonesia.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing; Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 2: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

Author 4: Supervision; Validation; Other contribution; Resources; Visuali-zation; Writing - original draft.

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