

Moderation in Anti-Colonial Praxis: Muhammadiyah, Wasathiyah, and Indonesia's Struggle for Independence

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Abstract

This article examines Muhammadiyah's contribution to Indonesia's struggle for independence through the analytical lens of wasathiyah, understood as principled moderation rather than passive centrism. Using qualitative historical-conceptual document analysis, it interprets organizational histories, leadership biographies, constitutional records, and scholarship published no later than 2022. The findings identify five interrelated modes of anti-colonial action: human-capacity formation through education and welfare; negotiated institutional engagement with colonial authorities; coalition building across Islamic and nationalist networks; strategic cooperation combined with resistance during the Japanese occupation; and constitutional compromise alongside armed defence after 1945. Muhammadiyah's moderation was therefore neither political neutrality nor avoidance of conflict. It joined normative firmness with strategic flexibility, employed both civic and military instruments, and subordinated exclusive organizational interests to the construction of a plural national state. The article also identifies tensions involving collaboration, retrospective heroization, and the gap between Islamic constitutional aspirations and national compromise. It concludes that Muhammadiyah's independence-era legacy is best described as institutionally grounded, ethically bounded, and nationally inclusive anti-colonialism.

Keywords: Muhammadiyah; wasathiyah; Indonesian independence; Islamic nationalism; anti-colonialism.

INTRODUCTION

Muhammadiyah's place in the Indonesian independence movement presents a conceptual puzzle. The organization, founded by Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta in 1912, was neither a revolutionary party nor a military association. Its best-known instruments were schools, preaching, publications, health services, women's organizations, youth training, and charitable work. Yet its institutional networks and leading figures became deeply involved in anti-colonial mobilization, the politics of the Japanese occupation, preparation for independence, constitutional negotiation, and armed defence of the new republic. Any account that equates anti-colonialism only with insurrection or party politics therefore understates Muhammadiyah's contribution (Alfian, 1989; Nakamura, 2012; Noer, 1973; Ricklefs, 2008).

The concept of wasathiyah offers a potentially useful lens for interpreting this history, but it also creates a risk of anachronism. Wasathiyah, commonly translated as moderation, balance, centrality, justice, or avoidance of excess, became a prominent term in contemporary Muslim discourse after the independence era. Muhammadiyah's early leaders more often spoke through the vocabularies of tajdid, Islam, progress, education, social service, unity, and national responsibility. It would therefore be historically careless to claim that Ahmad Dahlan, Mas Mansur, Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, or Sudirman

implemented a fully formulated doctrine bearing today's terminology. Wasathiyah should instead be used as a retrospective analytical category whose validity must be demonstrated through historical conduct (Hilmy, 2013; Kamali, 2015).

A defensible historical application requires a precise meaning. Moderation is not the arithmetic midpoint between colonial rule and independence, between resistance and submission, or between religious commitment and secular nationalism. Such a definition would turn moderation into indecision and obscure the coercive asymmetry of colonialism. In this article, wasathiyah denotes a disciplined combination of normative firmness, proportional strategy, institutional responsibility, openness to cooperation, rejection of indiscriminate violence, and willingness to accept legitimate compromise for a larger public good. It can include confrontation, civil disobedience, constitutional bargaining, or armed defence when these actions are directed by ethical and political judgment rather than absolutism.

Muhammadiyah's historical record supports this more demanding interpretation. Under Dutch rule, the organization sought legal recognition and used the limited associational space created by colonial policy, while simultaneously building indigenous educational and welfare institutions that weakened colonial monopolies of knowledge and social status. Its leaders interacted with Budi Utomo, Sarekat Islam, Partai Islam Indonesia, Majelis Islam A'la Indonesia, and broader nationalist coalitions without dissolving Muhammadiyah into a party. Under Japanese occupation, Mas Mansur entered state-sponsored bodies and used them to preserve Muslim organization and nationalist communication, while Ki Bagus Hadikusumo rejected practices such as seikerei that violated Islamic conviction. In 1945, Muhammadiyah figures defended Islamic aspirations but ultimately contributed to a constitutional settlement intended to preserve the republic's unity (Alfian, 1989; Benda, 1958; Hisyam, 2011).

The movement's contribution also exceeded the actions of nationally prominent elites. Muhammadiyah schools produced literate citizens and teachers; 'Aisiyah expanded women's participation in public life; Hizbul Wathan cultivated discipline, collective responsibility, and leadership; Penolong Kesengsaraan Oemoem normalized organized social assistance; and local branches created networks through which national consciousness could circulate. These institutions did not mechanically cause independence, but they formed social capacities without which political declarations and military mobilization would have had a narrower base (Peacock, 1978; Nakamura, 2012).

Existing scholarship has established Muhammadiyah as a Muslim modernist organization, a social movement, and an actor in Indonesian nationalism. Alfian's analysis remains foundational for understanding its political behaviour under Dutch colonialism, while Noer, Peacock, Nakamura, Shiraishi, and Ricklefs situate it within wider transformations of modern Islam and nationalism. Studies of Mas Mansur, Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, Masyumi, and the constitutional formation of Indonesia illuminate particular episodes within the wider histories of nationalism, popular mobilization, and revolutionary state formation (Kahin, 1952; Kartodirdjo, 1962; Shiraishi, 1990). However, the literature rarely integrates these episodes through an explicit theory of moderation that avoids portraying Muhammadiyah either as politically passive or as uniformly heroic.

This article asks three questions. First, how did Muhammadiyah's institutional strategy contribute to anti-colonial capacity before direct independence politics reached its decisive phase? Second, how did its leaders navigate cooperation, resistance, coalition, and compromise under Dutch and Japanese rule and during the establishment of the republic? Third, to what extent can these practices be interpreted as wasathiyah without projecting contemporary organizational doctrine backward onto the past? The article argues that Muhammadiyah practised an institutionally grounded form of anti-colonial moderation. It combined long-term social transformation with selective political engagement, principled resistance with tactical cooperation, and Islamic commitment with an inclusive national settlement.

METHOD

This study employs qualitative historical-conceptual document analysis. The method combines historical reconstruction with conceptual interpretation. Historical reconstruction identifies sequences, actors, institutions, and changing political contexts from Muhammadiyah's foundation in 1912 through the consolidation of Indonesian sovereignty in 1949, with selective attention to later organizational formulations that clarify how Muhammadiyah remembers and interprets this period. Conceptual interpretation evaluates whether the observed practices exhibit defensible characteristics of wasathiyah.

The source base consists of four categories. The first includes major historical scholarship on Muhammadiyah, Indonesian Islamic modernism, nationalism, the Japanese occupation, and the revolution. The second includes biographies and studies of Ahmad Dahlan, Mas Mansur, Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, Kasman Singodimedjo, and Sudirman. The third includes constitutional and organizational texts, especially records concerning the BPUPKI and PPKI debates, Muhammadiyah's historical self-understanding, and later statements on Pancasila and progressive Islam. The fourth includes peer-reviewed studies of Islamic moderation and Indonesian Muslim civil society. All cited materials were published no later than 2022, as required by the study design.

The documents were read through a structured coding framework. Evidence was classified according to six dimensions: normative orientation; organizational instrument; relationship with political authority; mode of struggle; treatment of religious and national plurality; and consequence for independence or state formation. A second coding cycle grouped episodes into recurrent strategic patterns: institution building, legal accommodation, coalition formation, selective cooperation, principled refusal, constitutional bargaining, and armed defence.

Wasathiyah was operationalized through five criteria. Normative firmness refers to preservation of essential religious and anti-colonial commitments. Strategic proportionality concerns the selection of means appropriate to context rather than maximal confrontation in every situation. Inclusive nationhood concerns the capacity to participate in a political community larger than one's own religious organization. Institutional responsibility refers to building durable educational, welfare, and civic capacities rather than relying only on charismatic mobilization. Ethical restraint concerns

the rejection of indiscriminate coercion, opportunistic collaboration, or sectarian domination. These criteria are analytical tools, not claims that historical actors used identical terms.

The analysis distinguishes three levels that are often conflated: formal decisions of Muhammadiyah as an organization, political activity by leaders serving in external bodies, and the formative influence of Muhammadiyah institutions on individuals. This distinction is necessary for figures such as Sudirman, whose Muhammadiyah and Hizbul Wathan background shaped his leadership but whose military command belonged to the republic, not to Muhammadiyah. It also prevents the organization from appropriating every achievement of a person who had some Muhammadiyah affiliation.

The study has limitations. Much of the available literature is elite-centred and retrospective, and official organizational histories tend toward commemoration. Local branch archives and women's experiences remain unevenly represented. The constitutional compromise of August 1945 is reconstructed from sources that differ over the precise sequence and influence of individual actors. The article therefore emphasizes convergent patterns and avoids assigning exclusive causality to Muhammadiyah. Its purpose is interpretive explanation, not a comprehensive institutional chronology or measurement of organizational impact.

Table 1. Analytical criteria for identifying wasathiyah in independence-era practice

Dimension	Historical indicator	What the criterion excludes
Normative firmness	Defence of faith, dignity, independence, and justice under coercive rule	Submission presented as moderation
Strategic proportionality	Use of education, negotiation, coalition, refusal, or force according to context	Permanent confrontation or unprincipled opportunism
Inclusive nationhood	Commitment to a republic shared by diverse religious and social groups	Sectarian monopoly over the nation
Institutional responsibility	Creation of schools, welfare bodies, cadres, publications, and civic networks	Dependence on temporary charismatic mobilization
Ethical restraint	Limits on coercion, acceptance of constitutional processes, and protection of unity	Indiscriminate violence and ends-justify-means politics

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Wasathiyah as a Retrospective, Not Native, Category

The first finding is methodological: wasathiyah is useful only when it does not replace the historical vocabulary of Muhammadiyah's early generations. Ahmad Dahlan's reformism was expressed through Qur'anic teaching, purification, education, social compassion, and the pursuit of progress. The organization later systematized *tajdid*, *tarjih*, social service, and national responsibility. Contemporary Muhammadiyah explicitly identifies wasathiyah as a characteristic of progressive Islam, but that formulation is the result of a century of doctrinal development rather than a ready-made blueprint applied in 1912 (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2022).

This distinction matters because moderate Islam is often reconstructed as a timeless essence. Historical actors are then selected as evidence for a present identity, while ambiguity, conflict, and change are removed. Muhammadiyah's independence-era record contains compromise and inclusion, but it also contains strong Islamic constitutional claims, resistance to colonial regulations, participation in political coalitions, and military struggle. A concept that recognizes only conciliation would misclassify much of this history.

The evidence instead supports wasathiyah as principled balance. Muhammadiyah did not treat all positions as equally valid. Colonial domination was not one legitimate pole to be balanced against freedom. Shinto-imperial rituals that contradicted tawhid were not acceptable cultural differences. At the same time, opposition did not dictate one permanent tactic. Legal registration, participation in official councils, cooperation with nationalist groups, withdrawal from compromised institutions, constitutional negotiation, and armed defence could all be legitimate if ordered toward freedom, public welfare, and unity.

This historical meaning corresponds to Kamali's account of wasathiyah as justice, balance, and avoidance of excess rather than weakness. It also corrects a policy-centred understanding in which moderation is measured mainly by friendliness toward government. During the independence struggle, a moderate actor could resist government because the government was colonial or coercive. The relevant question was not proximity to authority, but whether conduct preserved moral limits while pursuing legitimate collective emancipation.

2. Institutional Reform as Long-Term Anti-Colonial Preparation

Muhammadiyah's earliest contribution to independence was indirect but structurally important: it developed human and organizational capacities among colonized Muslims. Dutch colonial society distributed education, legal status, employment, and cultural prestige unequally. Ahmad Dahlan's decision to establish schools that combined Islamic instruction with modern subjects challenged the separation between religious learning and colonial modern education. Students were trained to inhabit both religious and modern public worlds rather than accept that competence, science, and administration belonged exclusively to colonial institutions (Abdullah, 1971; Alfian, 1989; Jainuri, 2002; Noer, 1973; Van Niel, 1960).

This educational reform had political consequences even when schools did not teach insurrection. Literacy expanded access to newspapers, organizational rules, public debate, and national vocabulary. Teacher mobility connected local communities. Standardized administration enabled branches to reproduce institutions across regions. The school formed disciplined subjects capable of participating in associations and bureaucracies. Anti-colonial capacity therefore grew through a mundane infrastructure of classrooms, schedules, examinations, publications, and trained personnel.

The movement's welfare institutions carried a similar logic. *Penolong Kesengsaraan Oemoem*, orphan care, clinics, and poor relief translated *al-Ma'un* into organized social service. They contested the assumption that indigenous Muslim society lacked the capacity for rational, continuous public provision. Charitable work created trust,

organizational legitimacy, and an alternative experience of collective responsibility. It was not simply humanitarian supplementation to colonial government; it was evidence that a colonized community could govern social needs through its own institutions (Peacock, 1978; Nakamura, 2012).

'Aisyiyah widened the social base of this transformation. Women's education, religious instruction, health work, early childhood education, and organizational leadership challenged both colonial hierarchy and restrictions within Muslim society. The independence struggle is often narrated through male politicians and soldiers, but the production of an educated public required changes in family, health, literacy, and women's participation. 'Aisyiyah's work shows that Muhammadiyah's nationalism was built partly through social reproduction and civic competence, not only through formal declarations (Blackburn, 2004; Pimpinan Pusat 'Aisyiyah, 1992).

Hizbul Wathan introduced another layer of capacity. Established as a scouting movement, it cultivated physical fitness, discipline, teamwork, service, command, and attachment to the homeland. These skills were not equivalent to military training, but they became relevant when colonial collapse and revolution required organized defence. Sudirman's formation as a Muhammadiyah teacher and Hizbul Wathan activist illustrates how civic education could later be converted into republican military leadership. The causal claim should remain modest: Muhammadiyah did not create the national army, but its youth institutions helped form individuals prepared for collective responsibility (Sardiman, 2008).

The anti-colonial significance of these institutions rests on their cumulative effect. They changed the distribution of knowledge, organizational skill, public confidence, and moral authority. Unlike a short-lived uprising, schools and welfare bodies could survive repression and reproduce cadres. This pattern satisfies the criterion of institutional responsibility: independence was approached as the creation of a capable people, not merely the removal of foreign rulers.

3. Legal Accommodation and Political Boundary Management under Dutch Rule

Muhammadiyah's relationship with the Dutch colonial state was neither collaboration in the pejorative sense nor absolute non-cooperation. The organization pursued legal recognition because registration protected schools, meetings, fundraising, and branch development. Colonial authorities initially restricted its legal scope and monitored its expansion. Muhammadiyah negotiated within these constraints, using law strategically while rejecting the legitimacy of colonial hierarchy as a permanent order (Alfian, 1989).

This strategy differed from parties organized around direct political confrontation. Muhammadiyah's official concentration on religion, education, and welfare reduced exposure to prohibition and allowed it to expand. Yet nonparty status did not mean political indifference. Ahmad Dahlan and other figures interacted with Budi Utomo and Sarekat Islam, and Muhammadiyah members participated in public debates about education, religious administration, missionary activity, labour, and representation. The movement managed a boundary between organizational mission and the political activity of its members.

Boundary management enabled plural networks. Muhammadiyah could cooperate with Javanese nationalists, Islamic modernists, merchants, teachers, and political activists without requiring complete ideological agreement. Its schools and congresses became meeting points across regions. This relational flexibility is one expression of wasathiyah: the organization retained a distinct religious project while entering wider associational life. It avoided both isolation and absorption, while remaining shaped by the social and cultural setting of Javanese reformism (Burhani, 2010; Darban, 2000).

The strategy was not without conflict. Colonial regulations affecting religious teachers, schools, marriage, inheritance, and the religious courts were experienced as interventions into Muslim life. Muhammadiyah leaders criticized policies that privileged customary law or restricted Islamic institutions. Ki Bagus Hadikusumo's work concerning the religious courts reflected the attempt to pursue Islamic claims through available legal channels, followed by disappointment when colonial authorities rejected recommendations favourable to Islamic law (Hisyam, 2011).

During the 1930s, the political environment became more openly nationalist and repressive. Mas Mansur, who led Muhammadiyah from 1937, was involved in the formation of Majelis Islam A'la Indonesia and in wider Islamic political cooperation. MIAI provided a platform for organizations with different jurisprudential and political orientations to coordinate around Muslim interests. Mas Mansur also engaged in Partai Islam Indonesia and broader nationalist initiatives. The distinction between Muhammadiyah and party politics remained, but leadership moved more directly into anti-colonial coalition building (Federspiel, 2001; Soebagijo, 1982).

The Dutch-period pattern can thus be described as negotiated institutional opposition. Muhammadiyah accepted legal procedures and sometimes cooperated with officials, but its institutions steadily transferred authority, education, welfare, and public confidence to indigenous society. It did not seek a heroic confrontation that would destroy its organizational base. Nor did it accept colonialism as morally legitimate. Strategic restraint served a long-term emancipatory project.

4. Selective Cooperation and Principled Resistance during Japanese Occupation

The Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 intensified the moral ambiguity of political action. Japan dismantled Dutch rule and mobilized Indonesian leaders, but it imposed military exploitation, censorship, forced labour, food extraction, and emperor-centred political rituals. Nationalist and Islamic leaders had to choose between withdrawal, resistance, and participation in institutions created by an occupying power. Simple categories of collaboration and resistance are inadequate because the same institution could be used both for imperial mobilization and nationalist preparation (Benda, 1958; Touwen-Bouwsma, 1996).

Mas Mansur's participation in the Putera leadership with Sukarno, Mohammad Hatta, and Ki Hadjar Dewantara represents strategic cooperation. Japanese authorities sought to harness the legitimacy of the 'Four Leaders,' while Indonesian figures used Putera to communicate with the public, sustain organizational networks, and advance national consciousness. Mas Mansur's involvement did not imply endorsement of Japanese domination. His position became increasingly difficult as occupation policies contradicted

promises of Asian liberation and imposed severe suffering (Federspiel, 2001; Soebagijo, 1982).

Muhammadiyah also participated in Islamic federative structures reorganized under Japanese rule. MIAI was replaced by Masyumi, which the occupation administration intended to supervise, yet Muslim leaders used the institution to consolidate communication and leadership. This was not risk-free. State-sponsored representation could narrow autonomy and implicate leaders in occupation propaganda. Nevertheless, complete withdrawal would have surrendered institutional space to the military government and weakened Muslim capacity at a decisive moment.

Ki Bagus Hadikusumo embodied a more explicit form of principled refusal. As Muhammadiyah's leader during the occupation, he opposed *seikerei*, the ceremonial bow toward the imperial palace associated with Japanese emperor worship. The episode is important because it demonstrates that tactical engagement had theological limits. Cooperation was permissible only while it did not require violation of *tawhid*. In the analytical framework of this article, this is normative firmness constraining strategic flexibility.

The Japanese period also accelerated military and administrative training among Indonesians. PETA, youth bodies, neighbourhood organizations, and occupation bureaucracies were designed for Japanese purposes but later supplied personnel and experience to the republic. Muhammadiyah-connected figures, including Kasman Singodimedjo and Sudirman, moved through this environment. Their later roles cannot be reduced to Muhammadiyah membership, yet the movement's earlier cadre formation interacted with these new opportunities.

The occupation therefore reveals a central characteristic of *wasathiyah* in political practice: means were evaluated relationally rather than classified as permanently pure or impure. Participation in an official body could be acceptable when it preserved the community and expanded national capacity; the same participation became unacceptable when it demanded theological surrender or direct complicity in oppression. This approach was ethically unstable and vulnerable to retrospective justification, but it was more realistic than a narrative of either total collaboration or pure resistance.

5. Constitutional Bargaining and Inclusive State Formation in 1945

The preparation of independence brought the relationship between Islamic conviction and national plurality to the centre of politics. Muhammadiyah figures were involved in BPUPKI and PPKI, where the philosophical basis, constitution, and institutional structure of the republic were debated. Ki Bagus Hadikusumo was a prominent advocate of Islam's public and constitutional significance. Abdul Kahar Muzakkir and Kasman Singodimedjo also participated in foundational processes. Their involvement demonstrates that Muhammadiyah's nonparty identity did not exclude direct participation in state formation.

The constitutional debates cannot be reduced to a conflict between secular nationalism and a homogeneous Islamic bloc. Muslim representatives differed over constitutional form, strategy, and the relationship between *sharia* and citizenship. Nationalists also held

diverse understandings of religion. The Jakarta Charter of 22 June 1945 represented an intermediate agreement, including the phrase obligating Muslims to follow Islamic law. It was both an Islamic achievement and a compromise because it stopped short of declaring an Islamic state (Latif, 2011; Maarif, 1985; Madinier, 2015; Yamin, 1959).

On 18 August 1945, the seven words concerning the obligation to implement Islamic law for Muslims were removed from the preamble, and the first principle became Belief in the One and Only God. Accounts differ over the exact communication, participants, and sequence that produced acceptance. Kasman Singodimedjo is often credited with persuading Ki Bagus to accept the change in the interest of national unity. Whatever the precise interpersonal sequence, the final settlement required Muslim leaders who had defended stronger Islamic language to accept a broader constitutional formula (Hisyam, 2011).

This episode is frequently presented as definitive proof of Muhammadiyah tolerance. Such a celebratory reading is incomplete. Ki Bagus did not enter the process as an indifferent centrist; he argued strongly for an Islamic constitutional foundation. Acceptance was costly because it relinquished a provision regarded as important by many Muslim representatives. The significance of the compromise lies precisely in the combination of conviction and concession. Compromise without prior commitment would carry little analytical meaning.

The decision can be interpreted as inclusive nationhood under conditions of emergency. The republic had just been proclaimed, Japanese authority remained, Allied and Dutch forces threatened return, and regions with substantial non-Muslim populations had to be incorporated within a national model that had to reconcile unity and diversity (Bertrand, 2004). A constitutional breakdown could have endangered state formation. Acceptance of the revised preamble placed the survival and territorial unity of the republic above maximal realization of one group's constitutional preference.

The settlement did not resolve the religion-state question permanently. Islamic parties later sought constitutional change, and debates over the Jakarta Charter continued. Wasathiyah should therefore not be represented as complete ideological harmony. It functioned as a political ethic for sustaining a shared state amid unresolved disagreement. The willingness to remain within constitutional politics, rather than treating an imperfect settlement as grounds for destroying the republic, is more important than the myth of unanimous consensus.

6. From Civic Formation to Armed Defence of the Republic

After the proclamation, independence had to be defended against returning colonial power and internal fragmentation. Muhammadiyah's contribution entered a more openly coercive phase. General Sudirman became the clearest symbol. Before his military career, he had worked as a Muhammadiyah teacher and school leader and was active in Hizbul Wathan. Under Japanese occupation he commanded a PETA battalion; after independence he became commander of the republican armed forces and led guerrilla resistance during the Dutch military offensives (Sardiman, 2008).

Sudirman's biography demonstrates that moderate anti-colonialism is not synonymous with pacifism. Armed defence can be consistent with wasathiyah when force is directed toward protecting a legitimate political community and remains subordinate to public authority and ethical purpose. Sudirman's military authority was republican rather than sectarian. His Muhammadiyah formation contributed moral discipline and organizational competence, but his command served a national army composed of diverse groups.

Other Muhammadiyah figures and local networks participated in defence organizations, logistics, religious mobilization, medical care, and public communication. Ki Bagus Hadikusumo supported the defence of independence and was associated with efforts to mobilize Muslim resistance. Kasman Singodimedjo served in foundational security and legal roles. Muhammadiyah hospitals, schools, branches, youth, and women's networks offered infrastructure that could support displaced populations and republican administration. Evidence varies by locality, so the contribution should not be homogenized.

The shift to armed struggle did not displace negotiation. The Indonesian revolution combined military resistance, diplomacy, institution building, and international advocacy. Muhammadiyah's wider pattern was similarly multi-modal. Its leaders and members could support armed defence while participating in constitutional and political institutions. This integration distinguishes disciplined defence from militarized absolutism.

The republic's survival also required restraint within the nationalist camp. Revolutionary violence sometimes targeted civilians, minorities, alleged collaborators, and rival political groups. Muhammadiyah's official memory emphasizes heroic service, but a wasathiyah analysis must judge conduct by protection of human dignity, not organizational identity. The available evidence supports a strong contribution to republican defence, yet it does not justify romanticizing all violence committed in the name of independence.

Taken together, the independence period shows a sequence rather than a single tactic: education and welfare produced capacity; legal organization preserved networks; coalitions connected Islamic and nationalist actors; selective cooperation used openings under occupation; principled refusal defended theological boundaries; constitutional compromise sustained unity; and armed defence protected the republic. This strategic plurality is the empirical core of Muhammadiyah's moderate anti-colonial praxis.

Table 2. Historical phases and modes of Muhammadiyah contribution

Period	Principal mode	Illustrative institutions or actors	Wasathiyah significance
1912-1930s	Social and educational capacity building	Muhammadiyah schools, PKO, Aisyiyah, Hizbul Wathan	Long-term emancipation through durable institutions
Dutch late-colonial period	Legal negotiation and coalition formation	Branches, congresses, MIAI, Mas Mansur	Strategic accommodation without accepting colonial permanence

Period	Principal mode	Illustrative institutions or actors	Wasathiyah significance
Japanese occupation, 1942-1945	Selective cooperation and principled refusal	Putera, Masyumi, Mas Mansur, Ki Bagus Hadikusumo	Use of political openings bounded by tawhid and communal protection
State formation, 1945	Constitutional bargaining	BPUPKI, PPKI, Ki Bagus, Kahar Muzakkir, Kasman	Firm Islamic advocacy combined with inclusive national compromise
Revolution, 1945-1949	Republican defence and civic support	Sudirman, local branches, youth and welfare networks	Legitimate force integrated with national institutions and public responsibility

Discussion

1. A Model of Institutionally Grounded Anti-Colonial Moderation

The findings support a model of institutionally grounded anti-colonial moderation. Muhammadiyah did not primarily pursue independence through seizure of political office. It changed the social capabilities of colonized Muslims and then connected those capabilities to broader nationalist action. Education, welfare, women's organization, youth formation, religious reasoning, and print culture were not peripheral to politics; they created the social conditions for political agency. This model expands conventional histories that privilege parties, armed organizations, and elite negotiations.

The model contains four linked logics. The first is formative: a free state requires citizens capable of knowledge, discipline, cooperation, and service. The second is relational: an organization can engage authorities and coalitions without surrendering its identity. The third is bounded pragmatism: tactical cooperation is acceptable only within normative limits. The fourth is national inclusion: Islamic public commitment must be negotiated within a plural political community. Together these logics explain why Muhammadiyah could appear cautious in one period and confrontational in another without necessarily abandoning a coherent orientation.

This interpretation challenges the assumption that moderation is politically conservative. Under colonial conditions, preserving the status quo would have meant preserving domination. Muhammadiyah's schools, welfare bodies, and public claims disrupted colonial distributions of authority even when they used legal forms. Moderate method and transformative outcome were compatible. The movement was reformist rather than revolutionary in organizational style, but reform accumulated into a challenge to colonial social order.

The interpretation also challenges the opposite romantic claim that every Muhammadiyah institution was consciously designed for national independence. Early actors pursued religious reform, education, social welfare, and communal dignity for their own reasons. Their work acquired nationalist significance within a changing political

context. Historical explanation should distinguish intention from consequence. Muhammadiyah's contribution was partly deliberate political action and partly the conversion of religious-social capacity into national capacity.

2. Moderation as Strategic Pluralism, Not Equidistance

Muhammadiyah's experience suggests that wasathiyah in conflict is better understood as strategic pluralism than equidistance. The movement used several forms of action simultaneously or sequentially: teaching, welfare, press, legal petition, federation, state-sponsored councils, theological refusal, constitutional bargaining, and armed defence. No single instrument defined moral authenticity. The ethical question concerned the relationship between means, context, and legitimate ends.

Strategic pluralism differs from opportunism because it requires stable boundaries. The seikerei controversy illustrates a theological boundary; the independence commitment created a political boundary; and the acceptance of a shared republic created a civic boundary. Cooperation that crossed these boundaries would cease to be moderate and become complicity. Conversely, refusal to negotiate when negotiation could preserve unity would become another form of excess.

This framework helps interpret Mas Mansur's Putera role. Participation in an occupation-sponsored institution can appear collaborationist when isolated from context. Yet complete nonparticipation might have eliminated access to national audiences and allowed the occupier to select less representative intermediaries. The correct evaluation depends on what the actor communicated, protected, enabled, and resisted, as well as the harms created by participation. Historical moderation is therefore a matter of accountable judgment, not retrospective labeling.

The same reasoning applies to the constitutional compromise. Accepting removal of the Jakarta Charter clause was not a neutral midpoint between an Islamic state and a secular state. It was a decision to preserve a political community while deferring or transforming one constitutional aspiration. The compromise was moderate because it recognized legitimate plurality and avoided making the republic hostage to maximal agreement, not because Islamic and non-Islamic arguments were treated as interchangeable.

3. Muhammadiyah, Islamic Nationalism, and the Plural Republic

Muhammadiyah's independence-era trajectory belongs within Islamic nationalism rather than a binary opposition between Islam and nationalism; it also differed from revolutionary Islamist projects that made exclusive sovereignty claims outside the emerging republic (Formichi, 2012). Its leaders understood Muslim reform and national emancipation as overlapping projects. Colonialism harmed religious life, education, economic dignity, and political agency; national independence created the possibility of realizing Islamic ethical commitments through a shared state. This did not require agreement that the state should be formally Islamic.

The movement's contribution to plural nationhood was institutional before it was doctrinal. Modern schools prepared students for participation in a common public sphere. Indonesian-language publications connected regions. National federations brought

organizations into negotiation. The republican army under Sudirman was not a confessional militia. Constitutional compromise accepted citizenship beyond Muhammadiyah and beyond Islam. These practices formed pluralism through shared institutions, even when theological views remained exclusivist in certain domains, anticipating the institutional civic Islam later associated with Indonesia's democratic public sphere (Azra, 2006; Hefner, 2000).

This distinction is important because moderation should not be inflated into liberal pluralism. Muhammadiyah's early leaders did not necessarily affirm all modern doctrines of religious equality, individual autonomy, or separation of religion and state. Ki Bagus pursued a significant constitutional role for Islam. The movement's purifying orientation could generate sharp judgments about other religious practices. Its contribution was moderate in the historical sense of sustaining cooperation and shared nationhood despite substantive disagreement, not necessarily in the sense of contemporary philosophical liberalism (Menchik, 2016).

The plural republic was therefore a negotiated achievement rather than the inevitable expression of a moderate national character. Muhammadiyah leaders accepted limits on their preferred constitutional formulation because the political community was religiously and regionally diverse. That choice established a precedent later reformulated as the Pancasila state being a national covenant and field of ethical witness. The later doctrine should not be projected backward, but it can be interpreted as an institutional memory of the 1945 compromise (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2015).

4. Contradictions, Silences, and the Politics of Memory

A critical account must also identify contradictions. First, strategic cooperation with colonial or occupation authorities always risked legitimizing domination. Legal recognition under the Dutch and participation under Japan protected organizational space but could also normalize unequal rule or implicate leaders in propaganda. Claims that Muhammadiyah consistently occupied a morally pure middle position erase the costs imposed on ordinary people by occupation institutions.

Second, organizational history often becomes a competition for nationalist credentials. Contemporary lists of Muhammadiyah-affiliated heroes can imply that the organization institutionally directed all their achievements. Such claims confuse membership, formative influence, and formal mandate. Sudirman was shaped by Muhammadiyah and Hizbul Wathan, but his national military leadership cannot be reduced to organizational ownership. Soekarno's interactions with Muhammadiyah likewise do not make his entire political career an organizational product.

Third, elite-centred history marginalizes local and gendered contributions. Women's education, nursing, food provision, family survival, refugee support, teaching, and local fundraising rarely receive the same attention as constitutional speeches or military command. A wasathiyah perspective that values social balance should correct this imbalance, yet the archive itself remains uneven. Future studies should reconstruct local branch action and 'Aisyiyah networks during occupation and revolution.

Fourth, moderation can be used retrospectively to domesticate political conflict. The constitutional compromise is remembered as harmony, while the depth of disagreement and later dissatisfaction are minimized. A more credible account recognizes that compromise preserved the republic without eliminating competing visions of the state. Wasathiyah is demonstrated by the capacity to manage conflict within a common political framework, not by pretending that conflict disappeared.

Finally, institutional moderation does not guarantee individual moderation. Muhammadiyah contained different political tendencies, and members operated in parties and armed groups with varying conduct. The organization itself evolved. The analytical claim should therefore remain at the level of dominant patterns and institutional logic, not essentialized character.

5. Implications for the Study of Moderate Islam

This historical case offers three implications for scholarship on moderate Islam. First, moderation must be evaluated under unequal power relations. An actor's willingness to cooperate with authority is not sufficient evidence, because colonial regimes often reward compliant religion. Moderate anti-colonialism may require opposition while maintaining ethical limits. The object of balance is not between oppressor and oppressed, but among moral commitments, strategic means, and consequences.

Second, institutions matter more than rhetoric. Muhammadiyah's most durable contribution came through organizations that educated, cared, trained, coordinated, and reproduced leadership. Speeches about moderation have limited value if schools, welfare systems, and political procedures do not embody justice and inclusion. Historical wasathiyah was credible because it generated capacities capable of surviving regime change.

Third, moderation is compatible with strong identity. Muhammadiyah's leaders did not suspend Islamic conviction to enter national politics. Their ability to compromise arose partly from confidence in religious organization and social institutions. A secure civic identity may negotiate more effectively than an identity dependent on constitutional monopoly. This helps explain how a purifying Islamic movement could contribute to a plural republic without becoming secular or abandoning public religion.

The case also warns against converting wasathiyah into state ideology. When government defines moderation primarily as loyalty, religious organizations may be encouraged to suppress criticism. Muhammadiyah's independence history demonstrates the opposite: responsible moderation included criticism of colonial laws, rejection of imposed rituals, use of nationalist platforms, and defence of the republic. Critical autonomy is therefore part of, not a deviation from, moderate civic Islam.

Table 3. Tensions that qualify a celebratory interpretation

Tension	Analytical risk	Required historical qualification
Accommodation versus collaboration	Treating all official participation as prudent moderation	Assess benefits, complicity, coercion, and alternatives in each context

Tension	Analytical risk	Required historical qualification
Islamic advocacy versus plural nationhood	Portraying compromise as absence of conviction	Recognize both firm constitutional claims and costly concession
Organizational contribution versus personal biography	Claiming every affiliated hero as an organizational product	Separate formal mandate, membership, and formative influence
Heroic leadership versus social infrastructure	Ignoring women, teachers, carers, and local branches	Reconstruct everyday institutional and gendered contributions
Moderation versus political obedience	Equating proximity to government with moderation	Include principled criticism, refusal, and legitimate defence

CONCLUSION

Muhammadiyah's role in Indonesia's struggle for independence cannot be adequately described as either political neutrality or direct revolutionary leadership, a conclusion consistent with historical accounts of its changing relationship with Islam, organization, and the state (Suwarno, 2010). Its distinctive contribution lay in connecting Islamic reform to national capacity. Schools produced educated citizens and teachers; welfare institutions demonstrated indigenous public responsibility; 'Aisyiyah expanded women's civic participation; Hizbul Wathan cultivated discipline and leadership; branches and publications connected communities; and senior figures entered coalitions, occupation-era institutions, constitutional bodies, and republican defence.

The historical pattern can be interpreted through wasathiyah only if moderation is understood as principled and contextual. Muhammadiyah's leaders combined normative firmness with strategic flexibility. They negotiated colonial legality without accepting colonial permanence, participated selectively in Japanese-sponsored bodies while resisting theological violation, advocated Islamic constitutional interests while accepting a broader national settlement, and supported armed defence within a republican rather than sectarian framework. Moderation was not avoidance of struggle; it was the ethical ordering of multiple forms of struggle.

The analysis also limits triumphalist conclusions. Wasathiyah was not the dominant historical terminology, participation under occupation involved moral ambiguity, constitutional compromise did not eliminate conflict, and biographies cannot be converted automatically into organizational property. The archive underrepresents local, women's, and nonelite experiences. Muhammadiyah's independence legacy is therefore strongest when described as a pattern of institutionally grounded, ethically bounded, and nationally inclusive anti-colonialism rather than as proof of an unchanging moderate essence.

This interpretation has contemporary relevance. It suggests that Islamic moderation should be measured by the ability to build public capacity, protect principled autonomy,

negotiate plurality, criticize unjust power, and accept constitutional restraint. A movement that merely avoids confrontation is not necessarily moderate, and a movement that resists oppression is not necessarily extreme. Muhammadiyah's independence-era experience demonstrates that civic institution building, political compromise, and disciplined resistance can belong to one coherent reformist project.

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