

The Role of Muhammadiyah in Fostering Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Tolerance

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Abstract

This article examines how Muhammadiyah fosters interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance in Indonesia through ideas, institutions, leadership networks, and public-service practices. Using qualitative document analysis, it compares organizational statements, congress decisions, leadership discourses, educational and humanitarian initiatives, and relevant scholarly accounts published no later than 2023. The findings identify three interconnected modes of engagement. First, Muhammadiyah frames religious difference through progressive Islam, civic responsibility, non-coercion, and competition in public virtue. Second, it develops elite and transnational dialogue through prominent leaders and inter-civilizational networks. Third, its schools, universities, hospitals, disaster programs, and minority-region institutions create practical encounters in which tolerance is performed through equal service rather than discussed only as doctrine. These contributions, however, remain uneven. Central commitments do not automatically eliminate exclusivist attitudes, local resistance, or ambiguity toward minority Muslim groups and controversial questions of religious freedom. Muhammadiyah is therefore best understood not as uniformly liberal, but as a large religious civil-society organization that institutionalizes a pragmatic, theologically bounded, and socially productive form of tolerance.

Keywords: *Muhammadiyah; interfaith dialogue; religious tolerance; civil Islam; progressive Islam.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious plurality is a permanent feature of Indonesian public life, but peaceful coexistence cannot be explained by demography or constitutional slogans alone. It depends on institutions capable of translating religious commitments into habits of restraint, recognition, cooperation, and conflict management. Islamic organizations are particularly important because they shape religious authority, education, welfare provision, political attitudes, and everyday moral language.

Among them, Muhammadiyah occupies a central position as a modernist movement with a nationwide network of schools, universities, hospitals, charitable bodies, women's organizations, youth associations, media platforms, and international branches. Its contribution to tolerance therefore cannot be assessed only through theological declarations. It must also be examined through the organizational environments in which Muslims and non-Muslims meet, study, receive care, respond to disasters, and negotiate common citizenship.

The scholarly literature commonly places Muhammadiyah, together with Nahdlatul Ulama, among the principal pillars of Indonesian civil Islam and democratic stability (Hefner, 2000; Menchik, 2016). This description is broadly justified, but it can become analytically lazy when moderation is treated as an organizational essence.

Muhammadiyah contains multiple ideological tendencies, regional cultures, professional communities, and generations. Its formal commitment to peace and citizenship coexists with boundaries concerning creed, conversion, interfaith marriage, heterodox Muslim communities, and the public regulation of religion. The relevant question is therefore not whether Muhammadiyah is simply tolerant or intolerant. The more useful question is how the organization defines legitimate tolerance, through which mechanisms it advances interfaith engagement, and where the limits and inconsistencies of those mechanisms appear.

Historically, Ahmad Dahlan developed relations with Christian educators and missionaries while defending an explicitly Islamic reformist project. Early Muhammadiyah combined doctrinal confidence with institutional learning, modern education, and social service. Menchik (2016) shows that this history cannot be reduced to liberal individualism: Indonesian Muslim organizations often support communal tolerance rooted in group rights, public theism, and legal pluralism rather than a strict privatization of religion. This distinction matters. Muhammadiyah's language of tolerance generally does not imply that all religions are theologically equivalent. It instead emphasizes freedom from coercion, peaceful social relations, justice, national solidarity, and cooperation in beneficial affairs.

In the post-authoritarian period, Muhammadiyah leaders such as Ahmad Syafii Maarif, Din Syamsuddin, Haedar Nashir, Abdul Mu'ti, and Syafiq Mughni have strengthened different dimensions of pluralist engagement. Some have foregrounded democracy and inclusive citizenship; others have expanded interfaith and inter-civilizational diplomacy; still others have promoted religious moderation, humanitarian cooperation, and educational inclusion. Muhammadiyah's 2015 formulation of the 'Islamic State of Indonesia as a Land of Testimony' and its broader discourse of Islam Berkemajuan provide an organizational vocabulary for linking Islamic commitment, Pancasila, democracy, and service to humanity (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2015; Nashir, 2019). By 2023, official Muhammadiyah communication explicitly described intolerance as contrary to Islam and proposed *fastabiqul khairat*—competition in doing good—as the proper mode of relations in a plural society (Muhammadiyah, 2023a).

Existing studies have contributed important historical, political, and theological explanations, but they often focus on elite discourse, a specific educational setting, or general comparisons among Indonesian Muslim organizations. This article offers an integrated institutional account. It asks: (1) How does Muhammadiyah frame interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance? (2) Through what organizational arenas are these commitments translated into practice? (3) What tensions limit or complicate its contribution? The article argues that Muhammadiyah fosters tolerance through a three-level architecture: normative framing, dialogical leadership, and service-based encounter. Its strongest contribution lies not in abstract pluralist theology but in creating durable institutions that make cooperation and equal service routine. Its principal weakness is the uneven translation of central narratives into local practice and the persistence of boundaries that protect communal orthodoxy while narrowing fuller forms of religious freedom.

METHOD

1. Research design

This study uses qualitative document analysis with a comparative institutional-narrative design. It is not a systematic literature review and does not attempt to quantify all publications on Muhammadiyah and tolerance. The unit of analysis is the organizational articulation of interfaith engagement: statements, concepts, programs, institutions, and publicly documented practices through which Muhammadiyah defines and performs relations with religious others. The design is appropriate because the research question concerns meaning, organizational translation, and internal tension rather than the statistical prevalence of individual attitudes.

2. Data corpus and temporal boundary

The corpus combines primary organizational materials and secondary scholarly sources published no later than 31 December 2023. Primary materials include Muhammadiyah congress formulations, official organizational statements, leadership speeches and profiles, publications concerning Islam Berkemajuan, religious moderation, interfaith dialogue, international branches, education, humanitarian action, and tolerance. Secondary materials include books and peer-reviewed studies on civil Islam, godly nationalism, pluralism, Islamic moderatism, Muhammadiyah's internal religious dynamics, and interreligious literacy. The 2023 boundary is applied consistently to both evidence and references. Later publications are excluded even when they discuss relevant events.

3. Analytical procedure

Documents were read through four coding categories: (a) normative foundations, including Qur'anic non-coercion, wasatiyyah, fastabiqul khairat, Pancasila, and Islam Berkemajuan; (b) actors and arenas, including central leaders, universities, schools, hospitals, autonomous organizations, international branches, and humanitarian bodies; (c) modes of engagement, including dialogue, education, public advocacy, equal service, and joint action; and (d) tensions, including doctrinal boundaries, local variation, political polarization, and uneven protection of minorities. A constant-comparison strategy was then used to distinguish elite dialogue from institutional encounter and to compare declarative tolerance with operational tolerance.

4. Validity and limitations

Triangulation was pursued by comparing official claims with scholarly interpretations and by distinguishing formal central policy from localized practice. The method nevertheless has limitations. Official documents tend to present normative and reputational narratives, while critical incidents may be underreported. The article does not measure the attitudes of Muhammadiyah's millions of members and cannot infer uniform organizational behavior. Its conclusions therefore concern dominant organizational repertoires and documented institutional mechanisms, not every branch, school, cleric, or member.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Normative foundations: bounded pluralism and public virtue

Muhammadiyah's approach begins with a distinction between theological conviction and social coexistence. The organization does not generally endorse pluralism understood as the equivalence of all religions. It maintains clear Islamic truth claims while rejecting coercion, hostility, destruction of worship, and discrimination in public service. In a 2023 official explanation, Muhammadiyah leader Dadang Kahmad grounded tolerance in Qur'anic recognition of human diversity, the prohibition of compulsion in religion, and the ethic of *fastabiqul khairat*. Religious communities should not compete by excluding or injuring one another; they should compete in service to society (Muhammadiyah, 2023a). This is a model of bounded pluralism: firm confessional identity combined with rules of peaceful and constructive coexistence.

Islam Berkemajuan provides the broader interpretive frame. Progressive Islam presents faith as a source of knowledge, emancipation, justice, welfare, and civilizational advancement rather than as a defensive identity. Nashir (2019) links Muhammadiyah's reformism to moderation, rationality, social transformation, and universal humanity. In this framework, tolerating another community is not merely passive endurance. Religious difference becomes a field in which Islamic ethics must demonstrate public benefit. The moral credibility of religion is tested through education, health, disaster response, poverty reduction, and protection of human dignity.

The concept of Indonesia as *Dar al-'Ahdi wa al-Shahadah* further nationalizes this ethic. The country is understood as a product of political covenant and as a field in which Muslims bear witness through constructive citizenship (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2015). This formulation rejects the idea that religious authenticity requires replacing the Indonesian constitutional order with a confessional state. Pancasila and the republic are accepted as legitimate common ground, while Islamic actors are called to prove their values through contribution. Interfaith tolerance is consequently tied to citizenship: non-Muslims are not temporary guests but participants in a shared political covenant.

This normative structure differs from a purely liberal account based on autonomous individual choice. Menchik (2014, 2016) describes Indonesian 'godly nationalism' and communal tolerance as a system in which recognized religious communities coexist within a theistic public order. Muhammadiyah largely operates inside this architecture. It supports religious freedom and intercommunal peace, but its tolerance can remain group-centered and may be less expansive toward communities judged heterodox or insufficiently recognized. The result is neither straightforward liberal pluralism nor simple intolerance. It is a civic theology that authorizes cooperation while preserving religious boundaries.

2. Leadership and interfaith diplomacy

A second mechanism is dialogical leadership. Muhammadiyah's national influence allows senior figures to participate in interreligious, diplomatic, and civilizational forums. Ahmad Syafii Maarif became widely associated with inclusive citizenship, moral criticism of majoritarianism, and friendship across religious boundaries. Miichi (2020) identifies Syafii Maarif among Muslim intellectuals connected to pluralist networks. His public

authority demonstrated that strong Islamic identification could coexist with defense of minority citizenship and criticism of sectarian mobilization.

Din Syamsuddin expanded this engagement through international interfaith diplomacy. Muhammadiyah's own institutional history describes his leadership as a period of intensified internationalization and a prominent role in peace and interfaith dialogue (Muhammadiyah, 2022a). Such diplomacy matters in at least three ways. It places Muhammadiyah in networks where religious leaders address conflict, climate change, inequality, and global peace; it counters representations of Islam as intrinsically hostile to other faiths; and it circulates international language about dialogue back into the organization's domestic discourse.

Other leaders have reinforced this orientation through educational exchanges and specialized roles. Abdul Mu'ti's involvement in Muslim exchange and interfaith initiatives, and Syafiq Mughni's service in interfaith and civilizational dialogue, illustrate the accumulation of organizational expertise. The establishment and growth of special Muhammadiyah branches abroad also create opportunities for contextual engagement. In the United States, for example, Muhammadiyah encouraged its branch to use the country's plural environment as a productive space for interfaith and inter-civilizational dialogue (Muhammadiyah, 2022b). Diasporic branches can therefore function not only as communities for Indonesian Muslims but also as representational and relational institutions.

Elite dialogue has limitations. It can become ceremonial, concentrated among educated leaders, and weakly connected to local congregational life. Photographs, conferences, and declarations do not necessarily alter prejudice. Yet elite engagement should not be dismissed as symbolic. Leaders define legitimate vocabularies, open institutional access, provide reputational protection for local initiatives, and signal that cooperation with non-Muslims is not a betrayal of Islam. In a hierarchical and networked organization, such authorization can be consequential even when implementation remains uneven.

3. Education as interreligious encounter

Muhammadiyah's educational network is a third and more structurally significant arena. Universities and schools transmit doctrine, but they also assemble students, teachers, professionals, and surrounding communities. In Muslim-majority regions, interfaith content may appear through civic education, religious moderation programs, guest lectures, student organizations, and community service. In Christian-majority areas of eastern Indonesia, some Muhammadiyah institutions enroll substantial numbers of non-Muslim students. These settings transform tolerance from an occasional dialogue into repeated interaction governed by admission rules, teaching practices, campus services, and professional relationships.

Interreligious literacy research in Indonesian higher education indicates that direct learning across religious institutions and places of worship can reduce stereotypes more effectively than abstract instruction alone (Ali et al., 2021). This insight clarifies Muhammadiyah's institutional potential. A university can create sustained contact under conditions of shared tasks, recognized status, and educational purpose. Non-Muslim students encounter an Islamic institution not only through preaching but through

lecturers, laboratories, scholarships, administration, and student friendships. Muslim students encounter religious difference as an ordinary social reality rather than a distant doctrinal category.

The transformative effect is not automatic. Educational institutions may reproduce majoritarian assumptions when curricula describe minorities only from an external Islamic viewpoint, when non-Muslim students lack meaningful representation, or when interfaith activity is limited to formal celebrations. The strongest programs move beyond tolerance as politeness toward interreligious literacy: the capacity to understand another tradition on its own terms, recognize internal diversity, discuss disagreement without humiliation, and cooperate without erasing identity. Such learning requires trained facilitators, reciprocal visits, reflective discussion, and institutional safeguards.

Muhammadiyah's education system also affects religious tolerance indirectly by forming professionals. Teachers, health workers, administrators, lawyers, and public officials educated in its institutions carry organizational norms into broader society. Where Islam Berkemajuan is translated into ethical professionalism and equal citizenship, the result is a diffusion of practical tolerance. Where education is reduced to identity consolidation, the same network can reinforce boundaries. Education is therefore a strategic but contested mechanism.

4. Service-based tolerance: health, humanitarianism, and shared vulnerability

Muhammadiyah's most distinctive contribution lies in service-based tolerance. Its hospitals, clinics, disaster-response bodies, charities, and social programs routinely serve beneficiaries without requiring theological agreement. The Al-Ma'un tradition interprets religion through responsibility toward the poor, orphans, the sick, and marginalized groups. In practice, a hospital encounter or disaster response can communicate religious ethics more persuasively than doctrinal debate because assistance addresses shared vulnerability.

Humanitarian action changes the structure of interfaith relations. Dialogue is no longer limited to discussing theological difference; communities work together on shelter, food, medicine, trauma recovery, environmental protection, or public health. Joint action creates what may be called operational trust: confidence generated by competence, reliability, and fairness. This form of trust is especially relevant in settings where theological consensus is impossible. Participants do not need to agree about salvation to agree that flood victims must be assisted or that patients deserve dignified care.

Service also protects tolerance from the charge that it is an imported or elite ideology. Muhammadiyah can justify equal treatment through Islamic obligations of justice and mercy, not by suspending its identity. This theological grounding makes cooperation more legitimate among members who may resist the language of religious pluralism. Fastabiqul khairat supplies a particularly effective bridge: religious communities retain distinct convictions while being encouraged to compete in public benefit rather than domination.

However, service provision should not be romanticized. An institution may treat non-Muslim patients fairly while leaving deeper power relations unexamined. Beneficiaries

may be included as recipients but not as decision-makers. Humanitarian cooperation can remain episodic and dissolve after a crisis. Furthermore, institutional branding can turn service into reputational competition. The critical standard is therefore not the existence of charity alone but whether governance ensures non-discrimination, reciprocity, participation, and accountability.

5. Public advocacy and resistance to intolerance

Muhammadiyah's public role also includes advocacy against sectarian conflict and exclusion. Through statements by central leaders, universities, media, and affiliated intellectuals, the organization normalizes the claim that violence, forced conformity, and obstruction of worship are incompatible with Islam. Its support for moderation is particularly important during periods of electoral polarization, when religious symbols are used to classify opponents as morally illegitimate. Jubba et al. (2022) show that moderate and conservative currents contest Islamic authority in Indonesia; Muhammadiyah's official positioning therefore contributes to the balance of that contest rather than operating outside it.

The organization's national status gives its statements political weight. A defense of peaceful coexistence from a major Islamic movement is harder to dismiss as anti-religious than the same claim from a secular actor. Muhammadiyah can intervene in Islamic vocabulary, citing scripture, jurisprudence, and prophetic ethics. This capacity is crucial because intolerance is often justified through religious arguments. Countering it requires more than legal prohibition; it requires credible theological and organizational authority.

Still, public advocacy is selective. Muhammadiyah has been more consistent in supporting harmony among recognized religions than in defending every contested minority. The boundaries of orthodoxy remain influential, and internal actors can differ on Ahmadiyah, Shi'a communities, indigenous beliefs, church construction, proselytization, and interfaith marriage. The organization's contribution should therefore be evaluated against concrete disputes, not only general declarations.

Discussion

1. From dialogue as event to tolerance as infrastructure

The findings suggest that Muhammadiyah's role is best conceptualized as the construction of tolerance infrastructure. Interfaith dialogue is commonly imagined as a meeting among clerics, but a large civil-society organization affects relations through rules, budgets, curricula, professional standards, buildings, and networks. A hospital's nondiscrimination policy, a university's admission practice, a disaster team's partnerships, and a leader's defense of minority citizenship are different components of the same infrastructure. They lower the social cost of interaction and make cooperation repeatable.

This institutional perspective extends civil Islam theory. Hefner (2000) emphasized associations, public ethics, and democratic participation, while Menchik (2016) demonstrated that tolerance in Indonesia is often communal and theistic rather than

conventionally liberal. Muhammadiyah illustrates both arguments. It supports democratic order and interreligious cooperation through a dense associational network, but it does so using Islamic and national covenantal language. Its tolerance is socially productive precisely because it is embedded in religious authority. At the same time, that embeddedness can constrain the recognition of individuals and communities outside accepted religious categories.

The distinction between declarative and operational tolerance is analytically important. Declarative tolerance consists of statements supporting harmony, moderation, and respect. Operational tolerance appears when institutions allocate services, authority, opportunities, and protection without discrimination. Muhammadiyah is strongest where its organizational routines convert moral claims into operational practice. Equal care in hospitals, inclusive access in minority-region universities, and cross-faith disaster cooperation are more difficult to reverse than a temporary public statement because they are supported by personnel, budgets, and professional norms.

2. Theological confidence as both resource and boundary

Muhammadiyah's confessional confidence is not merely an obstacle to dialogue. It can be a resource. Actors who feel that engagement threatens their identity tend to avoid or instrumentalize dialogue. By defining cooperation as an Islamic obligation and distinguishing social partnership from theological syncretism, Muhammadiyah reduces this anxiety. Its members can work with Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, and others without being asked to relativize their creed. The language of justice, mercy, covenant, and *fastabiqul khairat* makes tolerance internally intelligible.

The same boundary, however, can become exclusionary. A model centered on harmonious relations among officially recognized communities may insufficiently protect people whose beliefs are contested, fluid, indigenous, or nonreligious. Communal tolerance can privilege leaders and institutions over individual conscience. It can support peaceful group coexistence while remaining cautious toward conversion, mixed marriage, dissent within Islam, or criticism of religious authority. Muhammadiyah's contribution is therefore significant but not normatively complete.

This ambivalence should not be concealed by branding the organization as inherently moderate. Moderation is an organizational achievement that requires continual reproduction. Political polarization, social-media outrage, local competition, and generational change can weaken central commitments. Conversely, universities, women's groups, youth networks, and humanitarian professionals can deepen inclusive practices beyond the minimum expressed in formal doctrine. Muhammadiyah should be studied as a field of negotiated authority, not a single actor with one unchanging position.

3. Implications for organizational policy

Three practical implications follow. First, Muhammadiyah should connect elite dialogue more systematically to local institutions. National declarations need operational guidelines for schools, hospitals, mosques, and branches, including protocols for responding to obstruction of worship, hate speech, and local conflict. Second, interreligious literacy should be integrated into professional education, not confined to

ceremonial seminars. Students need structured encounters, comparative literacy, conflict-analysis skills, and ethical reflection on power and minority rights. Third, humanitarian partnerships should include joint planning and evaluation so that non-Muslim organizations are partners rather than merely beneficiaries or invited guests.

A further implication concerns internal accountability. Muhammadiyah can strengthen its credibility by documenting not only successful interfaith events but also difficult cases, disagreement, and corrective action. Transparent evaluation would allow the organization to identify gaps between central policy and local behavior. It would also prevent tolerance from becoming a reputational label detached from measurable practice.

Finally, Muhammadiyah's internationalization creates an opportunity to move from representing moderate Indonesian Islam to contributing substantive models of faith-based governance in plural societies. Its experience shows that interfaith engagement can be institutionalized through education, health, disaster response, and civic ethics. The transferable lesson is not a generic claim that all religions are peaceful. It is that peace requires organizations capable of disciplining their own constituencies, sustaining cooperation, and distributing public goods fairly

CONCLUSION

Muhammadiyah fosters interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance through a combination of normative interpretation, leadership diplomacy, educational encounter, humanitarian service, and public advocacy. Its discourse of Islam Berkemajuan, the civic covenant of Dar al-'Ahdi wa al-Shahadah, Qur'anic non-coercion, and fastabiquil khairat provides an Islamic justification for cooperation without requiring theological relativism. Senior leaders have connected the organization to national and international dialogue, while schools, universities, hospitals, and disaster-response institutions have made interreligious contact part of ordinary organizational life.

The central finding is that Muhammadiyah's strongest contribution is infrastructural. It turns tolerance from an episodic attitude into repeated practices supported by institutions. This does not make the organization uniformly tolerant. Its model remains theologically bounded, locally uneven, and sometimes less protective of contested minorities than its general language of harmony suggests. Elite dialogue can be ceremonial, service can be paternalistic, and central declarations can fail to govern local conduct.

Muhammadiyah should therefore be understood neither as a flawless pluralist organization nor as a movement whose doctrinal boundaries negate its civic contribution. It is a complex religious civil-society actor that has developed a pragmatic and socially consequential model of tolerance. The durability of that model depends on whether it continues to convert theological commitments into nondiscriminatory governance, reciprocal partnership, interreligious literacy, and accountable protection of religious freedom.

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