

**From Charisma to Rationalized Governance:
Religious Authority, Leadership Transformation,
and Organizational Modernity
in Muhammadiyah**

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Abstract: This article examines the historical transformation of religious authority in Muhammadiyah, one of Indonesia’s largest Islamic organizations, from its establishment in the early twentieth century to the present. Drawing on Max Weber’s theory of authority and organizational rationalization, the article traces a shift from charismatic and locality-based leadership centered on Ahmad Dahlan toward a highly institutionalized system of collective, rational-legal governance. Through an analysis of leadership selection, electoral procedures—particularly block voting—educational backgrounds, and interactional norms among leaders, the article argues that Muhammadiyah has deliberately depersonalized religious authority while retaining moral integrity and praxis as supplementary sources of legitimacy. A comparative discussion with Nahdlatul Ulama further highlights Muhammadiyah’s distinctive model of rationalized Islamic governance. The Muhammadiyah case demonstrates that modernization does not necessarily erode religious authority but can reconfigure it through organizational design, producing a stable, ethical, and democratic form of leadership within a modern Islamic movement.

Keywords: Muhammadiyah, Charisma, Routinization of Charisma, Religious Authority, Collective Leadership

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Introduction

Religious authority has long been a central concern in the sociology and anthropology of Islam. Scholars have repeatedly examined how religious leadership is established, maintained, and transformed under conditions of modernity, particularly in societies experiencing rapid political, educational, and organizational change.¹ In the context of the modern nation-state, Islamic organizations are increasingly required to reconcile religious legitimacy with bureaucratic governance, democratic participation, and institutional accountability.

Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912 in Yogyakarta by Ahmad Dahlan, represents a particularly illuminating case. From its inception, Muhammadiyah defined itself as a reformist movement emphasizing education, social welfare activities, and disciplined organizational formation. Unlike many religious movements that rely heavily on personal charisma or inherited authority, Muhammadiyah has consistently emphasized collective leadership, formal rules, and procedural legitimacy.

This article examines how Muhammadiyah has transformed religious authority over time, moving from charismatic and locality-based leadership toward a rationalized and institutionalized model of governance. Rather than viewing this transformation as a process of Westernization, the article argues that Muhammadiyah has pursued a distinctive strategy aimed at structurally constraining charismatic authority while strengthening positional authority. This strategy is achieved by emphasizing selection of leaders by formal election and impersonal relationships among activists and leaders.

By situating Muhammadiyah within a Weberian theoretical framework, this article contributes to broader discussions on religious authority, rationalization, and organizational modernity in Indonesian Islam. Through a brief comparison with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), this study demonstrates that the differences between Indonesia's two major Islamic organizations lie not only in their interpretations of Islamic teachings but also in the ways religious authority is constructed, exercised, and sustained, as well as in how relationships among leaders are institutionally structured.

¹ John R. Bowen, *Muslims through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

The data used in this article are drawn from the author's previous research on Muhammadiyah, based on a combination of library research and ethnographic fieldwork.² Ethnographic research was conducted over a six-month period in 2010, followed by several shorter research visits in subsequent years.

Theoretical Framework: Authority, Rationalization, and Religion

Max Weber's typology of authority—charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal—provides a foundational framework for understanding leadership dynamics in religious organizations.³ Charismatic authority rests on belief in the extraordinary qualities of an individual leader and is inherently unstable, as it depends on continual recognition by followers. Weber describes charisma as a specifically extraordinary form of authority that is not accessible to everyone.⁴

Traditional authority, by contrast, derives from long-established customs and inherited practices, often legitimized through lineage or sacred precedent. Rational-legal authority is grounded in formally codified rules, offices, and procedures, and obedience is owed not to a person but to an impersonal order. As Weber defines it, rational-legal authority rests on:⁵

a belief in the legality of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.

Weber associated rational-legal authority with bureaucratization and modernity, emphasizing its impersonality, predictability, and procedural legitimacy.

According to Weber, the three ideal types of authority are not static; rather, authority is continually transformed as the conditions under which

² Hyung-Jun Kim, "Collegial Leadership and Election in Muhammadiyah: Institutional Ways to Diffuse the Religious Authority of Leaders," *Studia Islamika* 30, no. 2 (2023): 211–234; Hyung-Jun Kim, "Leadership Changes and Inter-Leader Relationships in Muhammadiyah: From Kauman-Centred Activists to Loosely Connected Individuals," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 181 (2025): 34–68.

³ Max Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers*, edited with an introduction by S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

⁴ Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, 50–52.

⁵ Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, 46.

it is exercised change. A particularly critical moment of transformation occurs with the passing of a charismatic leader. In such cases, charisma faces the danger of disappearance unless it is transformed into a more permanent structure. Religious organizations founded by charismatic figures thus confront a fundamental dilemma: how to preserve moral and spiritual authority while preventing the instability inherent in personal charisma.

It is in this context that the concept of routinization becomes central. Weber argues that through the routinization of charisma, religious organizations are able to continue their activities beyond the lifetime of the founding figure. For charisma to be transformed into a permanent, routinized structure, the social relationships formed under charismatic leadership must themselves be transformed. During the initial phase of charismatic authority, leaders and followers typically stand outside the routines of everyday economic life, conventional occupations, and familial obligations.⁶ The process of routinization therefore involves transforming these anti-economic and anti-mundane orientations into rationalized structures, including stable organizational arrangements and a differentiated division between clergy and laity.

One pathway of routinization is the transformation of the charismatic group into a form of everyday authority, particularly into decentralized patrimonial structures or bureaucratic organization.⁷ In this way, Weber highlights routinization as a central challenge that religious organizations must confront in the absence of charismatic leaders.

While formalization of authority is a crucial mechanism of routinization, religious authority cannot be reduced to formal structures alone. Talal Asad argues that religious authority is embedded within discursive traditions and shaped by embodied practices, ethical discipline, and historically situated interpretations of texts. Authority, in this view, is not merely organizational but also moral and performative.⁸ Similarly, John Bowen demonstrates that Islamic authority emerges through the practical negotiation of knowledge, ritual, and social relations, rather than through formal hierarchy alone.⁹

⁶ Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, 21.

⁷ Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*, 60.

⁸ Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 1–30.

⁹ Bowen, *Muslims through Discourse*.

These perspectives are particularly relevant to Muhammadiyah, where the routinization of charisma depends not only on the establishment of bureaucratic structures but also on how those structures are enacted by office holders in the exercise of religious authority.

Charismatic Foundations: Ahmad Dahlan and Early Muhammadiyah

Muhammadiyah's early development was inseparable from the charismatic authority of its founder, Ahmad Dahlan. Dahlan's personal qualities—his religious insight, reformist vision, and ethical commitment—established him as a central figure whose authority extended beyond formal organizational roles. The expression “*Dahlan is Muhammadiyah*”¹⁰ captures the extent to which the movement's identity was initially intertwined with its founder.

Charismatic authority played a crucial mobilizing role during Muhammadiyah's formative years. Dahlan's leadership enabled the organization to challenge established religious practices, promote educational reform, and articulate a vision of Islam grounded in action (*praxis*).¹¹ Leaders were expected not only to articulate ideals but also to embody them through personal sacrifice and sustained commitment.

Importantly, however, Muhammadiyah did not allow charisma to become institutionalized as a permanent source of authority. Even during Dahlan's lifetime, the organization introduced formal regulations designed to limit personal power. Leadership was vested in a collective central board, initially consisting of nine members who governed on equal terms. Decision-making was structured around deliberation and consensus rather than unilateral authority.¹²

This early attempt at institutionalization, however, faced significant practical constraints. Dahlan's followers had little prior experience managing an organization in a fully bureaucratic manner. Moreover, the group of activists who assumed leadership after Dahlan's death was closely interconnected through locality, kinship, and seniority.

¹⁰ Muhammadiyah, “Amal Usaha Muhammadiyah Tahun 1912–23,” in *Sejarah Muhammadiyah Berdasarkan Keputusan Rapat Tiap-Tiap Kelompok Tim Penelitian dan Penulisan Sejarah Muhammadiyah* (Yogyakarta: unpublished manuscript, 1990).

¹¹ Hyung-Jun Kim, “Praxis and Religious Authority in Islam: The Case of Ahmad Dahlan, Founder of Muhammadiyah,” *Studia Islamika* 17, no. 1 (2010): 69–92.

¹² Hyung-Jun Kim, “Collegial Leadership and Election in Muhammadiyah,” 211–234.

Kauman, the neighborhood in Yogyakarta where Muhammadiyah was founded, remained a central hub of authority. Between 1912 and 1968, a majority of Muhammadiyah's chairpersons originated from Kauman, reflecting the continued importance of social proximity to the organization's origins.¹³

Leadership during this period was characterized by dense interpersonal networks. Early leaders often belonged to a relatively small circle of activists connected through family ties, shared formative experiences, and long-standing involvement in the movement. Seniority functioned as an informal criterion of legitimacy, rewarding long-term dedication and service.¹⁴

Nevertheless, this phase should not be equated with traditional authority in a Weberian sense. Leadership was neither hereditary nor justified by lineage alone. Formal elections and collective leadership structures remained in place. Locality and kinship operated as social resources that facilitated leadership selection and coordination rather than as explicit principles of authority.

In sum, this period can be understood as an intermediate stage in Muhammadiyah's transformation: charismatic authority had receded, yet leadership had not been fully detached from socially embedded relationships.

The Decline of Locality and the Formalization of Leadership after the 1950s

From the mid-twentieth century onward, Muhammadiyah underwent a significant transformation marked by the decline of locality as a criterion for leadership selection. The symbolic dominance of Kauman and Yogyakarta diminished sharply, and organizational leaders increasingly emerged from diverse regions across Indonesia. Place of birth ceased to function as a meaningful determinant of leadership legitimacy.

This shift reflected broader structural changes. The expansion of higher education, increased geographic mobility, and the consolidation of Muhammadiyah as a nationwide organization all contributed to the weakening of local power bases. Leadership selection became increasingly

¹³ Hyung-Jun Kim, "Leadership Changes and Inter-Leader Relationships in Muhammadiyah," 34–68.

¹⁴ Alfian, *Muhammadiyah: The Political Behavior of a Muslim Modernist Organization under Dutch Colonialism* (Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1989).

tied to organizational participation, educational attainment, and formal credentials rather than to local or familial affiliation.

As Hefner observes,¹⁵ modern Islamic organizations increasingly operate within national frameworks that reward bureaucratic competence and organizational discipline. In this context, Muhammadiyah's nationalization of leadership reduced the salience of local factionalism and reinforced the organization's egalitarian ideology.

The formalization of leadership had important organizational consequences. Authority was increasingly defined by positional roles within the organization rather than by social background or proximity to the movement's place of origin. This shift further institutionalized collective leadership and strengthened Muhammadiyah's commitment to impersonal and procedural forms of legitimacy.

1) Recruitment of Leaders: Elections

One of Muhammadiyah's most distinctive institutional features is its system of collective leadership combined with regular elections. Since Ahmad Dahlan's death, the organization has consistently adhered to formal electoral procedures. Between 1925 and 2022, Muhammadiyah conducted twenty-five leadership elections, with terms lasting either three or five years.

The electoral process consists of multiple phases. First, a large pool of candidates—typically numbering between 100 and 200 individuals—is nominated. Second, voters select thirty-nine candidates from this pool. Finally, thirteen leaders are chosen from among these thirty-nine to serve on the central board. This process employs a block voting system, requiring voters to select as many candidates as there are available positions.

Block voting has significant implications for the exercise of authority. It tends to produce narrow vote margins, thereby limiting the possibility that a single individual will emerge as a dominant leader. Religious authority and personal popularity cannot easily be translated into institutional power through numerical superiority. Instead, leadership is deliberately dispersed across a collective body.¹⁶

¹⁵ Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*.

¹⁶ Hyung-Jun Kim, "Collegial Leadership and Election in Muhammadiyah," 211–234.

From an organizational perspective, elections function less as arenas for competition over personal authority than as mechanisms for reaffirming collective governance. Authority is procedural in nature and structurally constrained by institutional design.

The block voting system can thus be understood as a deliberate technology of depersonalization. By minimizing vote differentials, Muhammadiyah prevents leadership legitimacy from becoming attached to individual charisma or popularity. Elections do not serve to identify who is most authoritative, but rather to determine who is eligible to participate in collective decision-making.

This institutional design aligns closely with Muhammadiyah's ideological emphasis on egalitarianism and shared responsibility. Leadership is conceived not as a hierarchy centered on a single figure, but as a coordinated body of equals. Authority resides in the office and in the procedure, rather than in the person.

Such a system stands in clear contrast to electoral arrangements that concentrate power in a single leader. Muhammadiyah's approach reflects a conscious effort to discipline authority and prevent its personalization.

2) Transformation from *Ulama* to *Cendekiawan*

A further dimension of Muhammadiyah's leadership transformation concerns changes in educational background. From the 1990s onward, a clear shift can be observed from leaders primarily trained as *ulama* to those identified as *cendekiawan* (Muslim intellectuals). Increasingly, Muhammadiyah's leaders possess advanced academic degrees and have been shaped by modern, and often Western-style, systems of higher education.

This transformation becomes evident when comparing the composition of central board candidates in the 1990–1995 elections with those in the 2015 and 2022 elections. In Muhammadiyah's electoral system, thirty-nine candidates for the central board are selected by the *Tanwir* council from a pool of approximately 100–200 recommended individuals. In both the 2015 and 2022 elections, all candidates were university graduates, with twenty-two holding master's degrees and fifty-three holding doctoral degrees. This represents a remarkable expansion of academic qualifications when contrasted with the 1990 and 1995 elections, during which eight

candidates did not have a college education and thirty-five had completed only undergraduate studies.¹⁷

The growing prominence of candidates with graduate-level education can be attributed partly to Muhammadiyah's longstanding commitment to modern education. Since its founding, the organization has invested heavily in schools and universities, fostering an internal culture that values academic credentials. At the same time, this trend reflects broader national transformations in Indonesia's Islamic educational landscape. From the late twentieth century onward, Islamic higher education institutions—particularly the *Institut Agama Islam Negeri* (IAIN)—produced a new generation of Muslim intellectuals who actively participated in Islamic discourse and organizational leadership across the country.¹⁸ This development further accelerated the inclusion of highly educated candidates within Muhammadiyah's leadership ranks.¹⁹

Although it is difficult to identify a precise starting point for this shift, candidate profiles from the 1978 central board election provide a useful reference. Of the fifty-three candidates at that time, twenty-nine held bachelor's degrees, while only two possessed master's-level qualifications.²⁰ These figures suggest that the 1980s marked a transitional period during which leaders with university education began to enter Muhammadiyah's central leadership in greater numbers.

This transformation in educational background has profound implications for religious authority. Traditional Islamic education in *pesantren* often fosters hierarchical and intimate teacher–student relationships that can extend into leadership networks and patterns of authority.²¹ By contrast,

¹⁷ Muhammadiyah, *Daftar Calon Pemimpin Pusat Muhammadiyah Periode 1990–1995* (Aceh: Panitia Pemilihan Anggota PP Muhammadiyah, 1990); Muhammadiyah, *Daftar Calon Pemimpin Pusat Muhammadiyah Periode 1995–2000* (Yogyakarta: Panitia Pemilihan Anggota PP Muhammadiyah, 1995); Muhammadiyah, *Daftar Calon Sementara Anggota PP Muhammadiyah Periode 2015–2020* (Makassar: Panitia Pemilihan Anggota PP Muhammadiyah, 2015); Muhammadiyah, *Daftar Calon Tetap: Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah Masa Jabatan 2022–2027* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 2022).

¹⁸ Fuad Jabali and Jamhari, *IAIN: Modernisasi Islam di Indonesia* (Ciputat: Logos Wacana Ilmu, 2002), 145–152.

¹⁹ Brankley Abbas, *Whose Islam?: The Western University and Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021).

²⁰ Muhammadiyah, *Data Calon Anggota PP Muhammadiyah Periode 1978–1981* (Yogyakarta: Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, 1978).

²¹ Martin van Bruinessen, “Pesantren and Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and

modern university education emphasizes critical inquiry, specialization, and analytical distance. As a result, educational authority within Muhammadiyah has become more fragmented rather than unified around shared modes of religious training. Leaders now emerge from diverse academic disciplines, reducing the likelihood of factionalism based on common educational lineages. Islamic knowledge is increasingly framed as something to be interpreted, debated, and enacted in practice, rather than memorized and transmitted through hierarchical chains of authority.

3) Interpersonal Relations and Interactional Formality

Transformations in leadership structure and educational background are also reflected in Muhammadiyah's interactional norms. The organization places strong emphasis on maintaining a clear separation between public and private spheres. Close personal relationships among leaders are generally discouraged, and interactions are largely confined to formal organizational settings.

Rosyad Sholeh, a former member of Muhammadiyah's central board, describes the dominant mode of interaction among leaders as follows:²²

Observations of life within the organization give the impression that practices such as mutual visits, affectionate relationships, and family-like interactions are largely absent. Our relationships, whether vertical or horizontal, remain strictly formal.

According to Sholeh, inter-leader relations in Muhammadiyah are governed primarily by formal rules and organizational regulations rather than by intimate personal ties. At the same time, he argues that cultivating informal relationships and personal networks beyond official boundaries can be beneficial, as such ties may foster trust and cooperation necessary for effective organizational functioning. Nevertheless, he concludes with a clear note of caution:²³

Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning," in *Texts from the Islands: Oral and Written Traditions of Indonesia and the Malay World*, edited by Wolfgang Marschall (Berne: University of Berne, 1994), 121–145.

²² Rosyad Sholeh, *Manajemen Dakwah Muhammadiyah: Mengimplementasikan Prinsip Manajerial dalam Meraih Kesusuksesan Dakwah* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2005), 191.

²³ Sholeh, *Manajemen Dakwah Muhammadiyah*, 194.

While informal relationships are indeed valuable, it is important not to overindulge in them. This is because excessive informal relationships can risk undermining organizational regulations.

Although Sholeh acknowledges the functional value of personal interactions, his reservations underscore a broader awareness among Muhammadiyah leaders of the risks associated with family-like bonds. Such ties are perceived as potential sources of factionalism that could undermine collective leadership and weaken procedural authority.

Haedar Nashir, the current president of Muhammadiyah, similarly characterizes interpersonal relations within the organization as marked by a “loss of personal contacts”.²⁴ He attributes this condition to the prioritization of organizational mechanisms over individual influence, emphasizing that authority is exercised through institutional processes rather than personal relationships.

Prominent Muhammadiyah figures frequently describe inter-leader relations as “dry” or emotionally distant. Practices such as frequent social visits or the cultivation of intimate personal ties are limited, and relationships are primarily functional and task-oriented. Interaction is shaped by meetings, committees, and formal deliberative forums rather than by informal social networks.

While this interactional formality may appear socially austere, it serves an important organizational function. By restricting informal intimacy, Muhammadiyah reduces the risk of patronage, favoritism, and factional loyalty. Authority remains firmly attached to institutional roles and procedural norms rather than to personal networks, reinforcing the organization’s commitment to depersonalized and collective leadership.

Concluding Remarks

Muhammadiyah’s historical trajectory illustrates a distinctive path of religious modernization. Over the course of its development, leadership has shifted from charismatic and locally embedded authority toward a rationalized, collective, and procedural form of governance. Charisma has not disappeared; rather, it has been structurally constrained and disciplined. Moral integrity and religious *praxis* remain central to leadership, but they

²⁴ Haedar Nashir, *Muhammadiyah: Gerakan Pembaruan* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2010), 393.

are exercised within clearly defined institutional boundaries rather than through personal dominance.

This case challenges the assumption that modernization necessarily entails the secularization or erosion of religious authority. Muhammadiyah demonstrates instead how religious authority can be reorganized, stabilized, and reproduced through deliberate organizational design. Authority is not weakened but redistributed—detached from individuals and reattached to offices, procedures, and collective mechanisms. For scholars of Islam, organization, and modernity, Muhammadiyah thus provides a compelling example of how religious authority can be transformed into positional authority without losing its ethical and spiritual foundations.

A brief comparison with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) further underscores the distinctiveness of Muhammadiyah's leadership model. NU has historically emphasized charismatic religious scholars (*kyai*), *pesantren*-based authority, and intimate teacher–student relationships. Religious authority in NU remains deeply embedded in personal networks and spiritual lineages (Bush 2009; Dhofier 1999). Muhammadiyah, by contrast, systematically minimizes charismatic and relational authority. Leadership legitimacy is grounded primarily in organizational position, procedural regularity, and collective governance. Where NU sustains a synthesis of traditional and charismatic authority, Muhammadiyah advances a model of rationalized and depersonalized governance.

From a Weberian perspective, Muhammadiyah can be understood as an organization that has pursued an unusually thorough routinization of charisma. Rather than allowing charismatic authority to crystallize into patrimonial or quasi-hereditary forms, Muhammadiyah has institutionalized mechanisms—such as collective leadership, block voting, and interactional formality—that actively prevent the re-emergence of personal domination. In Weber's terms, domination is increasingly exercised through rational-legal authority, where legitimacy rests on belief in the legality of procedures and the correctness of institutional roles rather than on the exceptional qualities of leaders.

In this sense, Muhammadiyah offers a critical contribution to the sociology and anthropology of religion by showing that rationalization need not result in disenchantment or spiritual dilution. Rather, rationalization may function as a technology for preserving religious authority under modern conditions—by transforming personal charisma into institutional capacity. Muhammadiyah's experience suggests that modern religious

organizations are not merely passive subjects of rationalization but active agents in shaping the forms that authority takes in modernity.

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