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## From “High” to “Normal” Politics: Muhammadiyah and the Prabowo Presidency

Alexander R Arifianto

### SYNOPSIS

**Alexander R Arifianto** argues that Muhammadiyah has decided to join Prabowo Subianto's cabinet for several pragmatic considerations. Nonetheless, Indonesia's second largest Islamic organisation remains critical of some of the administration's policies and calls on the new administration to pursue reforms aimed at reducing corruption and promoting good governance.

### COMMENTARY

Muhammadiyah — Indonesia's second largest Islamic organisation — is a key member of President Prabowo Subianto's rainbow coalition government. [Seven Muhammadiyah ministers and deputy ministers](#) are represented in Prabowo's cabinet, including Abdul Mu'ti, general secretary of the organisation, who becomes minister of primary and secondary education. In addition, [two young Muhammadiyah politicians](#) — Raja Juli Antoni and Fajar Riza UI Haq — were appointed as minister of forestry and deputy minister of primary and secondary education, respectively. Both are politicians affiliated with the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI), which is close to, but not formally aligned with former president Joko “Jokowi” Widodo.

Muhammadiyah's representation in the Prabowo cabinet is [far higher than it was during the Jokowi presidency](#), in which it was represented by only one cabinet minister. During Jokowi's term, Muhammadiyah often had an arms-length relationship with the president and [publicly criticised some of Jokowi's major legislative achievements](#), including the 2020 Omnibus Law on Job Creation and the 2023 Law on the Criminal Code.

Muhammadiyah's stance was in contrast to that of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation. NU [was a close supporter of the former president](#) and of

his legislative agenda, including the 2019 Law of Islamic Boarding Schools, which benefited tens of thousands of NU *pesantrens* (boarding schools) throughout Indonesia.

### **Muhammadiyah’s “High” Politics**

Hence, Muhammadiyah’s decision to allow several of its senior and emerging leaders to serve in the Prabowo cabinet constitutes a major shift in its relationship with the Indonesian state. From the mid-1980s, Muhammadiyah officials have argued that [the organisation was practising “high politics”](#) — meaning that Muhammadiyah avoids formal politics in favour of advocacy of “moral issues” important to its constituencies. Such advocacy involved making public statements on various issues ranging from corruption by public officials, and on proposed laws and regulations that the organisation perceived put its constituency at a disadvantage.

While Muhammadiyah allowed its leaders and activists to run for elected office and accept political appointments, they were only able to do so in their personal capacities. If they accepted political appointments, they were required to resign from their leadership positions in Muhammadiyah. This policy was highlighted when former Muhammadiyah chair Amien Rais stepped down from his position in 1998 to accept appointment as chairperson of the People’s Consultative Council (MPR) at the beginning of Indonesia’s Reformasi period.

### **Shift from “High” to “Normal” Politics**

Why after adopting the “high” politics route for many years, including under the Jokowi presidency, did Muhammadiyah leaders decide to accept appointments to the Prabowo cabinet — as well as [mining concessions given by state officials](#) — without having to resign their positions within the organisation? Recent discussions with Muhammadiyah activists revealed that there are several reasons behind this shift.

One reason is that Muhammadiyah wants to level the playing field with its competitors — most importantly NU, which had gained more benefits from the state during the previous decade of Jokowi’s presidency. During this period, various laws favourable to NU and incorporating many of its inputs — like [the 2019 Pesantren Law](#) — were enacted in spite of Muhammadiyah’s objections. According to some Muhammadiyah activists, accepting ministerial and other political appointments would allow the organisation a seat at the highest decision-making table and ensure that its concerns related to Islamic and educational affairs are incorporated by the Prabowo administration — and, more importantly, that Muhammadiyah’s voice will also be heard by the administration.

Another reason cited is that the organisation wants to ensure its social enterprises (*amal usaha*), which number [tens of thousands of entities throughout Indonesia](#), would not encounter cumbersome bureaucratic red tape, for instance, when obtaining permits and grant funding from various ministries and agencies. Over the next two decades, Muhammadiyah plans to establish more *amal usaha* institutions throughout Indonesia. These initiatives require close cooperation with the state bureaucracies that regulate these institutions, particularly in the education and health sectors. Having

ministers and deputy ministers with Muhammadiyah backgrounds in these sectors are part of the organisation's strategy to safeguard its *amal usaha* institutions.

Another plausible rationale for Muhammadiyah's decision is that it believes that closer cooperation with the Prabowo administration would prevent its followers [from leaving the organisation to join more conservative Islamist groups](#). Several recent surveys, including one conducted by [the Indonesian Survey Circle \(LSI\) Denny JA](#) shows that over the past decade, the number of respondents who self-identified as Muhammadiyah followers has declined from 9.4 per cent in 2005 to 5.7 per cent in 2023.

The decline in Muhammadiyah's following is especially pronounced [among its young followers under 40 years of age](#), with many joining Islamist groups like Jemaah Tarbiyah — the parent organisation of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) — and the now prohibited Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) as well as dozens of Salafi movements throughout Indonesia. Muhammadiyah's long-standing [policy of not partaking in formal politics](#) and its moderate ideology, [which promotes loyalty to the Indonesian state](#), are often used as justification by younger Muhammadiyah followers to join the abovementioned groups. These followers believe such groups are willing to take more critical positions against various state policies than Muhammadiyah is.

Concerned about the prospect of further loss of followers to more ideologically conservative competitors, Muhammadiyah leaders feel they need to be closer to the Indonesian state in order [to prevent conservative Islamists](#) from infiltrating the organisation and its affiliated *amal usaha* institutions. Accepting political appointments as cabinet ministers is an acceptable trade-off for the organisation's leaders to prevent further loss of followers, because it signals that the organisation still has political influence that can be transformed into tangible benefits for the rank-and-file over the long run.

### **Muhammadiyah and Prabowo's Policies**

Due to the reasons above, Muhammadiyah leaders are willing to forgo their "high" politics and trade it for "normal" politics by accepting the appointment of its cadres to the Prabowo cabinet. However, given that under its "high politics," Muhammadiyah functions as an advocate for its followers and regularly express disagreements over government policies that it perceives may not be beneficial to its followers and wider constituency, there are concerns whether the organisation would continue to do so once it is part of the new administration.

As 2025 begins, there are signs that Muhammadiyah leaders are still able to criticise government policies that they perceive might negatively affect the welfare of Muhammadiyah followers. On 19 December 2024, Muhammadiyah chair Haedar Nashir issued a statement calling on the Prabowo administration to [reconsider its proposed value-added tax \(VAT\) increase from 11 to 12 per cent](#), which was due to have taken effect on 1 January 2025. Haedar declared that each new economic policy must be "based upon the principle of social justice" and must prioritise the welfare of small–medium enterprises and the middle class.

After the president's [31 December announcement](#) that the 12 per cent VAT rate would apply only to "certain luxury goods and services" to be specified in a future regulation of the Directorate General of Taxation of the Ministry of Finance, Haedar demanded that the administration immediately [specify which items are to be classified as "luxury items"](#) in order to avoid further speculation among the community. The Muhammadiyah chair also commented that the new VAT rate should only be applicable to the higher education sector, implying that it should not apply to privately run primary and secondary schools. As of late 2024, [Muhammadiyah ran 5,346 schools](#), which are part of its *amal usaha* enterprises.

In addition, the Muhammadiyah leadership, in their annual [year-end reflection statement](#), highlighted several issues of concern they believe the Prabowo administration should pay close attention to in 2025, including corruption among state officials and the consolidation of Indonesia's democracy following the 2024 general election. While noting that they support the Prabowo administration's ongoing initiative to combat corruption, they also expressed concern regarding increased incidents of money politics and "public immorality acts" among many state officials. The Muhammadiyah leadership urged the administration to commit itself to promoting good governance practices so that such habits are "observed everyday by all state officials in their public duties".



President Prabowo Subianto announced on 31 December 2024 that the increase in value-added tax (VAT) rate from 11 per cent to 12 per cent will be imposed on certain luxury goods and services.

*Image by [BPMI Setpres/Muchlis Jr.](#)*

## Concluding Thoughts

Muhammadiyah's recent shift from "high" to "normal" politics was motivated by several pragmatic considerations. These include preventing further loss of political influence to NU, its main competitor. The shift is also intended to discourage Muhammadiyah followers — particularly young adults — from switching to more ideologically conservative Islamist organisations. Muhammadiyah leaders believe that by joining the Prabowo coalition, they can win back the influence they lost within the past decade and secure resources to prevent further erosion of their base.

While there are concerns that by joining the government, the organisation might lose its ability to be an advocate for the various concerns of its constituency, its public

statements issued in late December 2024 seem to alleviate such concerns. The statements also indicate that Muhammadiyah leaders may disagree with the administration's policy proposals if they perceive that such proposals are not conducive to improving the welfare of Indonesia's growing Muslim middle class.

It remains to be seen whether this trend will continue over the term of the Prabowo administration, which will end in October 2029. In addition, it remains to be seen whether Muhammadiyah appointees in the government, particularly those in the primary and secondary education and the higher education, science, and technology ministries, can implement curriculum reforms that would improve the educational attainment of Indonesian students, while also committing themselves to follow through on the good governance reforms recommended by their organisation.

**Alexander R Arifianto** is Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Indonesia Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).