Shaping Resemblance in Relational Dynamics: Exploring the Interactions between Indonesian Islamic Organizations and China*

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Abstract

This study explores the evolving relationship between China and Indonesian Islamic organizations, focusing on Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. Departing from conventional perspectives on China's religious diplomacy, it proposes a relational framework to elucidate the nuanced dynamics of these interactions. Emphasizing the construction of an "imagined resemblance" as a key element in relationship formation, the article examines how NU and Muhammadiyah engage with China to promote their respective religious doctrines. NU aligns Chinese elements with historical contributions to highlight pluralism and moderation in Islam Nusantara, while Muhammadiyah interacts with contemporary China to advance Progressive Islam in addressing modern societal challenges. Fruitful engagements with China stem from the alignment between China's accommodating religious diplomacy and the specific aspirations of NU and Muhammadiyah. Nevertheless, challenges occasionally emerge, underscoring the misaligned

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perceptions, the agency of Indonesian Islamic organizations, and the boundaries within China's religious diplomacy.

In recent years, China and Indonesian Islamic organizations have garnered significant scholarly interest. Despite long-standing apprehensions about communism and wariness of "Chineseness," Indonesia Islamic organizations have increasingly engaged with China, with a growing number of Indonesian *santri* (students from Islamic boarding schools) pursuing education in China since 2015. By 2020, the Chinese chapter of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, had over 600 members.[1] Indonesian Islamic organizations frequently visit China and foster diverse, collaborative relationships with Chinese counterparts. However, skepticism, particularly from Western perspectives, has arisen, alleging that China is "buying" influence within these organizations.

Existing studies mainly focus on China's religious diplomacy to appeal to Indonesian Muslims but lack analysis of the constraints on mutual cooperation and the diverse focus areas of Indonesia's Islamic organizations in their engagement with China. This study addresses this gap by applying relational theory, which underscores the importance of "imagined resemblance" in forming relationship formation. It proposes an analytical framework to understand how China and Indonesian Islamic organizations navigate their dynamic interactions. The framework outlines a process for developing resemblance, emphasizing the critical step of aligning proposed similarities with the counterpart's existing repertoire. Through this approach, we aim to provide insights into the complexities of their collaborations, explain divergences in focus, and clarify cases of failure.

This article explores the specific repertoires of potential "imagined resemblance" within NU and Muhammadiyah, and their engagements with China. NU, the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, represents approximately 20 percent of the population. Rooted in traditionalist Islamic principles, NU upholds values of tolerance, pluralism, and the compatibility of local culture with Islamic doctrines. Central to its ethos is the concept of *taqlid*, which emphasizes conformity to traditional interpretations expounded by religious scholars (*ulama*). Muhammadiyah, the second largest Islamic organization, follows a modernist religious doctrine. With over 60 million members, it espouses a progressive