




## Political Linkages of the Indonesian Islamic Student Movement

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the political linkages constructed by the Indonesian Islamic student movement organization PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang between 2017 and 2024. Moving beyond conventional party-centered models, the research explores how a student movement organization strategically engages with political, civil, and economic actors to sustain its representation and legitimacy. Employing a qualitative approach and a multiple case study design, data were collected through document analysis and in-depth interviews with seven former chairpersons of the organization. The findings reveal that political linkages are asymmetrically distributed across domains. In the political society domain, linkages are pragmatic, alumni-facilitated, and often intensified during election cycles. In the civil society domain, linkages are ideologically rooted and embedded in long-standing relationships with Nahdlatul Ulama. Meanwhile, linkages with the economic society are structurally weak due to the organization's professional orientation and limited alumni presence in the private sector.

**Keywords:** Political Linkages, PMII, Indonesian Islamic Student Movement

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### ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji tautan politik yang dibangun oleh organisasi gerakan mahasiswa Islam, PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang, dalam rentang waktu 2017 hingga 2024. Berangkat dari kritik terhadap model tautan politik yang berpusat pada partai politik, studi ini menelusuri bagaimana sebuah organisasi mahasiswa secara strategis menjalin hubungan dengan aktor-aktor di ranah politik, sipil, dan ekonomi untuk mempertahankan representasi dan legitimasi mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus jamak, dengan pengumpulan data melalui analisis dokumen dan wawancara mendalam terhadap tujuh mantan ketua organisasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa tautan politik terdistribusi secara asimetris antar ranah. Di ranah masyarakat politik, tautan bersifat pragmatis, difasilitasi oleh alumni, dan cenderung meningkat menjelang pemilu. Di ranah masyarakat sipil, tautan bersifat ideologis dan terbangun melalui relasi jangka panjang dengan Nahdlatul Ulama. Sementara itu, di ranah masyarakat ekonomi, tautan relatif lemah karena orientasi profesi organisasi dan minimnya keterlibatan alumni di sektor privat.

**Kata kunci:** Tautan Politik, PMII, Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia

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## 1. Introduction

This research aims to examine the political linkages built by Islamic student movement organizations as a strategy to maintain their representation. The research will focus on how such political linkages are built and operated by student movement organizations with various institutional units in three domains: political society, civil society, and economic society. With this approach, this research seeks to show how it differs from the basic concepts of political linkages that are generally between political parties and voters (Lawson, 1988), politicians and citizens (Kitschelt, 2000), civil society organizations (CSOs) and parliament (Lay, 2017), urban poor movements and politicians (Savirani & Aspinall, 2017), or politicians with economic actors, civil society, and fellow politicians (Cahyati et al., 2019). This research tries to see the contextualization of political linkages beyond the usual use of concepts. The case study used is Pergerakan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia (PMII) Al-Ghozali Semarang, an external campus student organization in Semarang City.

The study of political linkages as a strategy to maintain the representation of social movement organizations is very important for several reasons. First, the organization that is the focus of this case study, PMII, is interesting because it is a pro-democracy movement organization that emerged organically and not as a wing of a political party. Therefore, since this organization is not tied to a political party, an exploration of the political linkages they use becomes very relevant. Second, a broad understanding of politics and extensive studies in this field highlight the importance of exploring the political linkages built by PMII. This opens up the possibility of political linkages that are not limited to those usually associated with political parties or parliament and politicians. Third, the representation of PMII as a student movement organization adds an important layer to this research. Student movement organizations are often considered pressure groups that play a significant role in the sustainability of democracy.

History has shown that the existence of student movement organizations cannot be ignored in the dynamics of social change that have continuously influenced Indonesia's political landscape, from the Old Order era to the post-reform era. The 1998 Reformasi, which is considered a successful outcome of the democratization process, marked the beginning of the collapse of authoritarianism, which in turn provided wider space for pro-democracy actors to move more freely. Students, civil society organizations (CSOs), and youth organizations remain trusted as the main channels that can accommodate public participation and voice criticism from the grassroots (Afrianto, 2022). The presence of students through social movement organizations is still considered an important effort in maintaining democratization - even used as a significant benchmark in the journey towards a democratic country (Akbar, 2016). This is because student movement organizations often emerge when democratic institutions are considered not functioning properly, corruption is rampant, political morale is deteriorating, and state economic policies do not lead to social (Wahyu, 2019). This condition can be seen as an indicator that social movements by students tend to depend on the current political situation. The current generation of students also participates in debates within the framework of social movements as a response to a policy and situation that is considered not ideal.

The current generation of students is involved in debates within the framework of social movements in response to policies and conditions that are considered not ideal. They not only try to understand the aspirations of the people but also examine the basis of the policies launched by the government. Student actions are often interpreted as a form of public defiance that reflects people's dissatisfaction with the government, which is considered to be getting away from public expectations (Alfajri, 2020). It is important to note that activism in student organizations is a minority phenomenon, where only a small proportion of the student population is active in organizational activities. Even in situations of mass demonstrations on campus, the majority of participants generally come from this minority group. Social movements are generally oppositional, seeking to challenge established government authority or other actors with power (Altbach, 2007).

The dynamism of this movement illustrates the tendency of students to question and criticize public policies sharply, as well as illustrating their central role in maintaining the function of social control. Students, through their social movements, act as a barometer of the health of democracy, reflecting the failure or success of the government in meeting the expectations of society. This movement not only reflects resistance to policies that are considered detrimental but also becomes a medium to express the aspirations and expectations of the wider society. Student interventions in the political and social spheres demonstrate the existence of a dialectical relationship between academic actors and political structures, where student movement organizations function as agents of social change that are critical of political dynamics that they see as incompatible with the principles of justice and democracy.

In the Indonesian context, there is a phenomenon of weak linkages between the student movement and the parliament and government, which can be seen in the lack of open participation and socialization in the legislative process. The principle of democratic representation requires a balance in providing a broad space

for participation for all groups of society. The rigid and closed relationship between students and parliament and the government is further exacerbated by the repressive response of the authorities during demonstrations and the defensive response from the government, which often triggers antipathy and follow-up movements (Wasisto & Prayudi, 2019). This tendency occurs because the student movement is a political actor that is outside the formal political habitat and always carries out its political activities by pressuring formal political institutions. Students, as part of a social movement, often choose not to enter the formal political system or hold public office, to maintain their independence and be able to influence public policy from the outside (Husin, 2014). This approach shows their commitment to remain critical and not be co-opted by existing political structures.

In Latin America, the conversation about the success of student movements is based on the political linkages between student movement organizations and political parties. These linkages can create significant political opportunities to influence policy. The concept of political linkages at this point is considered a political potential that plays an important role in encouraging students to design strategies for mobilizing movements and protests (Pavlic, 2020). This is where the success of student movements and protests is considered an effective strategy to improve their bargaining position. This strategy proves successful when the target of the protest is involved in a reciprocal relationship in every mobilization and protest action (Lipsky, 1968). The importance of cooperation and linkages between political parties and student movement organizations in the Latin American context emphasizes the serious role played by both parties in the process of democratization and policy change.

The political opportunities that result from solid political linkages can provide students with a strong foundation to articulate their demands more effectively and amplify their voices in pursuit of political goals. As such, mobilization strategies built on good linkages can be key to success in influencing political decisions and shaping more inclusive and responsive policies. In this context, the reciprocal relationship between political parties and student movements is an important cornerstone in Latin American political dynamics, demonstrating that cooperation between different political actors can drive substantial changes in political governance and democratic development. The role of students as critical and active agents of change in realizing more progressive and inclusive political goals highlights the importance of sustaining constructive dialogue between parties involved in the political process to achieve positive and sustainable change in Latin American society.

It is important to investigate the relationship between student movements and political linkages, although conversations about student movements often tend to focus more on 'mainstream' issues in social movements. In the world of social movements, the two main inseparable components are the social movement organization itself and its relationship with other external units. Some argue that the success or failure of a social movement depends on the quality of the political linkages it builds with other groups and individuals outside the scope of the organization (Aveni, 1978). Thus, both the organizational achievements of the movement and its interactions with external units need to be taken into account in the analysis of political linkages. However, it is important to note that the purpose of this study is not to judge the success or failure of a student movement, but to highlight the importance of political linkages as a crucial element that helps student movements maintain their representation.

As mentioned above, in Latin American countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica, student movements have been able to initiate large mobilizations with the support of strong political linkages with political parties (Pavlic, 2020). So what about the political linkages built by student movement organizations outside political parties? This research aims to answer that question. In Indonesia, studies on student movements are usually more focused on the perspective of social movement theory, and less comprehensive analysis in the context of political linkages. Therefore, the importance of this research is to identify gaps in the understanding of the relationship between student movement organizations and political linkages in three domains (political society, economic society, and civil society), and how these factors contribute to the sustainability of student movement organizations in Indonesia.

This study contributes to the broader scholarship on political linkages by introducing the perspective of student movement organizations—specifically Islamic-based student organizations—as relevant political actors outside the conventional party-based framework. Unlike previous studies that examine linkages primarily between parties, voters, and state institutions, this study emphasizes how political linkages are actively constructed by a student organization that positions itself as non-partisan, yet maintains strategic relationships across multiple domains. By analyzing PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang's linkages with political, civil, and economic society, this research offers a contextualized understanding of linkage formation in the Indonesian context—one that includes ideological affinities, pragmatic collaborations, and institutional limitations shaped by the organizational culture of student movements. Theoretically, this study advances a

reconceptualization of political linkages as not only electoral or transactional but also as value-driven and informal, rooted in the socio-religious networks embedded within civil society.

## 2. Method

This research adopts a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design to explore the political linkages constructed by PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang from 2017 to 2024. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate given the study's focus on processes, meanings, and contextual dynamics that shape political linkages beyond formal institutional structures. The case study method is particularly useful for understanding contemporary phenomena within real-life settings, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are blurred (Creswell, 2013). PMII Al-Ghozali was selected as the research site based on its unique position as a student movement organization that is formally independent from political parties, yet embedded in a complex network of ideological, religious, and political affiliations. Situated at Universitas Negeri Semarang, the organization operates at the intersection of youth, Islam, and political engagement, providing a rich context for investigating the informal dimensions of political linkage-building in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

Data collection was conducted through two primary methods: (1) desk study and (2) in-depth interviews. The desk study involved a comprehensive review of relevant organizational documents, media reports, activity archives, and public statements issued by PMII Al-Ghozali, particularly those related to its interactions with external institutions. This was supplemented by the collection of secondary literature on political linkages, student movements, and Islamic civil society in Indonesia. The second method, in-depth interviews, was conducted with seven key informants who served as chairpersons of PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang across different periods between 2017 and 2024. These individuals were purposively selected based on their strategic roles in the organization and their involvement in external engagement with political, civil, or economic actors. The interviews focused on exploring their perspectives, strategies, and experiences in initiating or managing political linkages across various domains. The use of multiple informants enabled a longitudinal and comparative perspective on how linkage strategies evolved over time.

Data from both sources were thematically analyzed using a framework derived from linkage theory (Kitschelt, 2000) (Lawson, 1988) and civil society domain analysis (Cohen & Arato, 1992), with particular attention to identifying patterns in initiation, form, strength, and actor involvement across the political, civil, and economic domains. Triangulation was employed to ensure the validity of findings by cross-checking information from interviews, organizational records, and public documents. This methodological design enables a contextualized and layered understanding of how student movement organizations—especially those outside the formal political establishment—construct and navigate political linkages in a fragmented and competitive democratic setting.

## 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents and analyzes the empirical findings regarding the political linkages of PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang across three societal domains: political society, civil society, and economic society. The analysis draws on the theoretical framework of political linkages as developed by Lawson (1988) and Kitschelt (2000), with a contextual modification based on Cohen & Arato's (1992) classification of societal domains. This approach enables a domain-based understanding of how political linkages are formed, the actors involved, the forms they take, and the strategic or ideological motivations behind them. Rather than treating political linkages as linear, transactional, or exclusively electoral, this study approaches them as relational phenomena—highly shaped by the organization's values, positionality, and external sociopolitical dynamics.

PMII Al-Ghozali, as a student movement organization rooted in Islamic values and operating within a state university context, demonstrates varied modes of engagement across domains. These linkages are not uniform in strength, regularity, or orientation; instead, they reflect distinct rationales: instrumental in the political domain, ideological in the civil domain, and structurally constrained in the economic domain. To systematically present the findings, this section is organized into three sub-sections corresponding to each domain. Each sub-section identifies (1) the forms of linkage observed, (2) the strength and continuity of engagement, (3) the key actors involved, and (4) the broader implications for understanding student organizations as political agents. This structure allows for both domain-specific depth and cross-domain comparison.

### Political Linkage in the Political Society Domain

PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang's engagement with political society—comprising political parties, elected officials, government bureaucracies, and state institutions—demonstrates a pragmatic and episodic pattern of linkage, intensifying particularly during electoral cycles. These linkages are not rooted in formal institutional alliances, but are instead forged through informal interactions, alumni relationships, and event-based collaborations. While the organization officially maintains a non-partisan stance, its political linkages are often shaped by mutual interest and strategic timing, rather than long-term ideological alignment. One prominent example includes a proposed collaboration with the Ministry of Defense for a public seminar. While framed publicly as a civic-educational initiative, the initiative's timing (coinciding with pre-election political activity) and the involvement of politically connected alumni indicate a layered set of motivations. This event exemplifies how PMII leverages its organizational identity and networks to gain institutional recognition, while providing external actors (such as ministries or politicians) with access to youth-based constituencies and moral legitimacy.

The primary initiators of such linkages are often alumni of PMII who hold or seek political office, or political elites with prior relationships to the organization. In these instances, alumni serve as brokers or intermediaries, facilitating connections between the student organization and broader political structures. These actors navigate between formal politics and grassroots organizing, thereby functioning as both insiders and boundary-crossers. While these linkages offer opportunities—such as access to resources, visibility, and strategic influence—they also pose risks. The intensification of contact during election periods reflects an instrumental logic, which may compromise the organization's perceived neutrality or trigger internal debates about co-optation. The organization's strategic ambivalence (simultaneously maintaining a neutral discourse while engaging in selective collaborations) demonstrates the negotiated nature of student political agency in contemporary Indonesia.

Moreover, this linkage pattern aligns with what Kitschelt (2000) describes as a clientelistic or elite-centered model of political linkage, where interactions are personalized, informal, and driven by elite networks rather than organizational mandates. However, in PMII's case, these linkages are not merely transactional. They often carry symbolic value (positioning the organization as a relevant civic actor) and serve as a tool for organizational branding, especially during leadership transitions or recruitment periods. In summary, the political domain linkage is characterized by: initiation by politically active alumni or external elites; event-based and short-term collaborations; strengthening during election cycles, and; a pragmatic balance between maintaining independence and accessing political capital.

### Political Linkage in the Civil Society Domain

In contrast to its episodic and pragmatic engagements with political society, PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang exhibits more stable, enduring, and ideologically grounded linkages within the civil society domain. Civil society actors (particularly religious organizations, community-based groups, and other non-state social formations) form a central part of PMII's ecosystem, shaping its cultural identity, moral authority, and sociopolitical orientation. The most significant linkage in this domain is PMII's deep-rooted affiliation with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organization. This connection is not merely historical or symbolic; it is embedded in shared religious values, doctrinal proximity (*Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah*), and overlapping membership bases. Many PMII members and alumni also actively participate in NU-affiliated institutions, such as pesantren networks, local religious councils, and NU's youth wings. These overlaps create a structural linkage wherein PMII operates as part of a larger socio-religious constellation, rather than as an isolated student organization.

Unlike the political domain, where linkages are often initiated externally, civil society linkages are primarily initiated and maintained by PMII itself. This self-driven orientation is evident in various collaborative activities, ranging from joint religious events, public discussions, and community service programs, to routine participation in civil society forums focused on education, tolerance, and social justice. These engagements are less contingent on political timing and more rooted in a shared normative agenda. The form of linkage in this domain is also qualitatively different. Rather than event-based or instrumental, it takes the form of long-term cooperation, discursive alignment, and mutual reinforcement of legitimacy. PMII draws moral and organizational strength from its association with NU, while NU benefits from the intellectual and activist energy that student cadres bring to its broader agenda. This reciprocal relationship helps PMII sustain its relevance in civil society and maintain ideological consistency amid shifting political landscapes.

The strength of civil society linkages is not measured by electoral outcomes or policy gains, but by the organization's sustained visibility, legitimacy, and embeddedness in the moral order of Indonesian Islam. These linkages enable PMII to navigate civic discourse, participate in identity politics, and contribute to grassroots

mobilization without direct dependence on state institutions or electoral structures. This domain aligns with what social movement (Diani, 1992) (Fuchs, 2006) describe as value-driven, identity-based networks, where informal associations serve as the basis for collective action. PMII's civil society linkage exemplifies this model, showing how student organizations can act as mediators between religious authority and civic engagement. In summary, the civil society domain linkage is characterized by: initiation from within the organization; rooting in shared ideology and religious values; consistency and long-term engagement, and; functioning as a source of legitimacy, not merely strategic advantage.

### **Political Linkage in the Economic Society Domain**

Compared to the political and civil domains, PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang's linkage with actors in the economic society (such as entrepreneurs, private businesses, and corporate networks) is the least developed and most structurally constrained. This absence is not merely accidental, but reflects both the organizational culture of PMII and the institutional limitations that shape its orientation and alumni trajectories. PMII Al-Ghozali is based at Universitas Negeri Semarang, an institution historically oriented toward teacher education and civil service careers. As a result, the majority of PMII's alumni pursue professional paths in public education, bureaucracy, or religious institutions rather than entrepreneurship or the private sector. This sectoral orientation limits the presence of alumni in business environments who could otherwise function as economic brokers or sponsors. The organization's embeddedness in a religious-social mission further deprioritizes market-based advocacy or economic activism as part of its core agenda.

Consequently, no structured economic linkage mechanisms, such as alumni business forums, institutional partnerships with private enterprises, or entrepreneurship training programs—were observed during the research period (2017–2024). When informal economic linkages did occur, they were often incidental, personal, or reactive, such as accessing modest funding from sympathetic alumni for specific events. These instances, however, lack the continuity, institutional design, or strategic vision that characterize political or civil society linkages. This weak engagement in the economic domain reflects what Cohen & Arato (1992) identify as a civil society bias in certain social movements, where the economic field is viewed with caution or even ambivalence. In the case of PMII, this hesitation is reinforced by an internal discourse that often associates market interests with neoliberalism, moral compromise, or elite co-optation. As such, the absence of economic linkage is not only structural but also ideologically reinforced, maintaining a form of symbolic distance from capitalist domains.

The consequence of this weak linkage is twofold. First, PMII's capacity to access material resources (such as infrastructure, mobility, or long-term funding) is highly dependent on civil and political domains. Second, the lack of engagement with economic actors inhibits the organization's potential to influence development discourses, local entrepreneurship, or youth economic empowerment in Semarang and beyond. This also limits opportunities to build sustainable models of student-based social entrepreneurship or economic independence. In summary, the economic society domain linkage is characterized by: very weak or absent structural engagement, lack of alumni presence in the private sector; organizational disinterest toward economic collaboration, and; ideological skepticism toward market-oriented activities.

### **Cross-Domain Comparison and Synthesis**

The analysis across the three societal domains (political, civil, and economic) reveals a distinct asymmetry in the strength, motivation, and institutionalization of political linkages constructed by PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang. Each domain offers a different logic of engagement, shaped by internal organizational identity and external structural opportunities. In the political society domain, linkages are opportunistic, externally driven, and closely tied to election cycles. These interactions are largely informal and pragmatic, initiated through elite networks (particularly alumni) and sustained through temporary collaborations. While such engagements can elevate organizational visibility and provide access to power, they are susceptible to instrumentalization and co-optation, especially when not accompanied by ideological alignment or long-term strategies. In the civil society domain, linkages are more durable, identity-based, and internally cultivated. The organization's deep affiliation with Nahdlatul Ulama and its shared religious-cultural ethos serve as the foundation for routine collaboration and social legitimacy. Unlike in the political domain, these linkages are less volatile and more resistant to political cycles, allowing PMII to maintain consistent civic relevance rooted in moral authority and communal responsibility.

Meanwhile, in the economic domain, the organization's absence of structured engagement illustrates both a strategic and structural limitation. The lack of economic linkages results not only from organizational disinterest, but also from the demographic profile of alumni and the absence of internal mechanisms to cultivate relationships with private-sector actors. This constraint limits access to material resources and broader societal influence, narrowing PMII's strategic reach. These domain-based differences are summarized in the following

comparative table:

Table 1. Domain-based differences

Domain	Form of Linkage	Strenghts	Key Actors	Underlying Logic
<b>Political Society</b>	Informal, episodic, alumni-facilitated	Strong (cyclical)	Politicians, alumni in politics	Pragmatic, opportunity-driven
<b>Civil Society</b>	Structural, ideological, cultural-religious	Moderate to strong	NU, civil organizations	Value-based, identity-reinforcing
<b>Economic Society</b>	Incidental, informal, underdeveloped	Weak	Few alumni, minimal private contacts	Structurally constrained, ideologically distant

This asymmetry suggests that political linkage formation among student movements is contingent and selective, rather than uniform or equally distributed. It also challenges traditional models of linkage that assume symmetrical institutional access or linear relationships between actors and domains. Theoretically, these findings support a reconceptualization of political linkages as multi-dimensional and hybrid, combining ideological alignment, pragmatic adaptation, and structural constraints. For student organizations like PMII, political agency is enacted not through formal alliances or electoral participation, but through a mix of symbolic positioning, selective collaboration, and embeddedness within sociocultural networks. Practically, this domain-sensitive understanding of political linkage emphasizes the importance of strategic navigation, organizational identity, and long-term orientation in sustaining political relevance. It also reveals the vulnerabilities of youth-based movements that lack economic infrastructure, making them heavily reliant on civil and political goodwill.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that PMII Al-Ghozali Semarang, as an Islamic-based student movement organization, constructs and maintains political linkages in an asymmetrical and domain-specific manner across the political, civil, and economic sectors. Linkages with political society are largely pragmatic, informal, and intensified during electoral cycles—facilitated through alumni networks and strategic collaborations. In contrast, civil society linkages are more ideologically grounded and sustained through long-standing religious affiliations, particularly with Nahdlatul Ulama. Meanwhile, linkages with the economic domain remain underdeveloped, constrained by both organizational orientation and alumni trajectories that are skewed toward civil service rather than entrepreneurship. These findings suggest that student organizations do not engage in political linkage formation uniformly across sectors. Instead, they develop selective and adaptive strategies shaped by organizational identity, ideological commitments, and external political opportunities. The asymmetry observed in PMII's linkage patterns reflects not only sectoral limitations but also strategic considerations to balance independence, legitimacy, and resource access.

Theoretically, this research contributes to a reconceptualization of political linkages by shifting the focus from formal, electoral relationships to informal, value-driven, and actor-specific engagements that emerge from within civil society. It challenges the narrow, transactional models of linkage theory by illustrating how student organizations function as autonomous political agents that actively navigate, resist, and reconfigure their connections to broader power structures.

Practically, the study underscores the continued relevance of student movements in shaping democratic participation, especially in contexts where formal institutions fall short of inclusive representation. By documenting how PMII strategically manages its linkages without being formally absorbed into political parties or market structures, this research offers new insights into grassroots political agency and the evolving role of youth organizations in Indonesia's post-reform political landscape. Future research may build upon this study by exploring comparative cases across different ideological or institutional student organizations, or by examining how political linkages evolve over longer organizational life cycles and shifting political regimes.

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