the idea of HMI-MPO as a place of diversity, and one that challenges the
and religious discussions is not surprising. Indeed one would expect
students to present their viewpoints. The organization aids students to cultivate the
neo-capitalism, social injustice, morality, Islamic politics, and religious
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of the organization has two unstated objectives: to encourage and en-
try with thirty-eight branches spread all over Indonesia. Its Yogyakarta
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Plurality in a student association
One example of what a democratic organization might look like in
practice can be found among the members of Indonesia’s oldest and big-
gest Islamic student association, the Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (HMI).
HMI was founded in Yogyakarta in 1947 and split in two in 1986 over the
issue of whether to give in to the pressure of the regime to replace the
Islamist basis of the organization with the national ideology of
Pancasila. HMI-MPO is the fraction that stood up against the government and as a
consequence was forced to go underground for twelve years. HMI-MPO
is a cadre-training organization that concentrates on political, religious,
and intellectual training of members (cadres) by way of formal training
courses and informal discussions. It is well represented in the coun-
try with thirty-eight branches spread all over Indonesia. Its Yogyakarta
branch is the biggest branch with 3000 active members dispersed over
forty-two secretariats (komisariat) at different universities and colleges.
The sheer number of members gives the branch a certain substance. But
the fact that Yogyakarta has a reputation of housing the most liberal, free
spirited, and intellectually innovating milieu in the country has also led to
the expectation that the Yogyakarta branch should play a leading role in
the political and ideological leadership of the organization. HMI-MPO
has a decentralized structure with a high degree of autono-
maly at the branch level where a great deal of variety exists. Some branches
are known for their intellectual or political characters, while others are
better known for their religious or Sufi orientations. There is room for
a large degree of experimentation and variation on the training courses,
and it is generally understood that students join the organization for vari-
ous reasons. Some are in search of a deepened understanding of Islam,
whereas others are attracted by the intellectual discussions, the politi-
cal leadership training, or the social activities. The training component of
the organization has two unstated objectives: to encourage and en-
able students to reflect on political and religious issues like globalization,
neo-capitalism, social injustice, morality, Islamic politics, and religious
socialism, and to endow them with the talents to argue their cases and
present their viewpoints. The organization aids students to cultivate the
art of critical reflection and argumentation, competencies that are diffi-
cult to acquire alone within the normative system of education where an
authoritarian “yes-man” culture still persists.
The notion that HMI-MPO functions as a forum for academic, politi-
cal, and religious discussions is not surprising. Indeed one would expect
this to be a dominant aspect of a Muslim student organization. However,
the idea of HMI-MPO as a place of diversity, and one that challenges the
students and gives them a chance to meet and interact with fellow stu-
dents of different religious or political backgrounds is notable because

Recently there has been a great deal of talk on the need to accommodate, modify, and pacify
the radical elements of Muslim communities. Yet it is not well understood how a process of
accommodation could be carried out, or by whom? Student groups, who have long been
on the vanguard of social and political change in Indonesia, can serve as a living example of
democratic accommodation.1

It inadvertently causes a great deal of confusion and anxiety. When asked why
they joined the organization, students frequently cite their desire to meet peo-
ple who are different from themselves. As one student explained, “I wanted to
to get to know people with different back-
grounds from mine.” Another student
noted, “I wanted to learn how to discuss and debate.” These statements reveal the
internal plurality, which you need to accommodate and pacify. The value of diversity.

Religious mediation
The debate-society aspect of HMI-MPO combines with a religious iden-
tity which has been sharpened by the rebellious history of the organiza-
tion. HMI-MPO has a reputation for being Islamic because it was the only
organization out of the two that had the courage to stand up against
the regime and defend its Islamic basis and because it still maintains a mild
form of gender segregation (female members are not allowed to shake
hands or ride bikes with male members). At the same time, it is heir to a
theological renewal movement from the 1970s that challenges its members

to find their own religious truth and encourages them to rational-
ize and scrutinize their own religious practices. As one student recounts,
“I was shocked at first. One exercise was called “A day without God”
and the idea was to encourage us to experience what that felt like and

One student who defected from HMI only to return to it a year later
explains, “The training course at HMI made me confused. I was urged to
join a discussion on God, and afterwards I was confused as to whether
God really exists or not, so I left HMI and joined KAMMI. But they turned
out to be too extreme and too exclusive. All we ever talked about was
religion. Intellectual discussions were not allowed, so after a year I went
back to HMI.”

It is the combined position towards critical inquiry and religious identity
that enables HMI-MPO to bridge the gap between the liberal and
the fundamentalist elements among students and contribute to a
moderating and dialoguing process internally within the organization
as well as externally among other student organizations. The HMI-MPO
is able to facilitate a dialogue between the organizations due to its own
internal plurality, which makes it credible among
the liberal Muslims, and also because it has a rep-
utation of being Islamic, which gives it credibility among
more conservative Muslims.

Notes
1. This article is based on ethnographic research
for a Ph.D dissertation. The fieldwork was
carried out among Muslim university students
in the Central Javanese town of Yogyakarta
from September 2003 to August 2004
2. Robert W. Hefner, “Muslim democrats and
Islamist violence in post-Soerharto Indonesia,”
in Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism,
Contestation, Democratization, ed. Robert
Hefner (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
2005), 273-301.

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