



# Wasatiyyah in Nigeria and Indonesia: The Muhammadiyah Organization and the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria as Case Studies



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## Abstract:

Kamali (2015) states that the term Wasatiyyah denotes 'balance,' a concept that implies maintaining equilibrium between the extremes encountered in daily life. Philosophically, the perfection of any entity is contingent upon its inherent balance. For instance, the physiological symmetry of the human body—specifically the two legs—facilitates physical stability. Should one limb be missing or replaced by an artificial one, the innate balance that defines the human form as a complete whole would be affected. Consequently, this paper aims to explore the concept of Wasatiyyah, which is commonly referred to as religious moderation. This paper aims to describe and compare how the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) and the Indonesian organization Muhammadiyah maintain this moderation, specifically regarding their stances on pluralism, liberalism, and Islamism. This paper argues that both organizations exhibit a "moderate in practice, conservative in belief" profile. They uphold traditional theological purism while simultaneously adopting modern organizational methods, conventional education, and democratic participation. It is found that Muhammadiyah maintains its 'Wasatiyyah' by prioritizing institutional stability and national unity over the implementation of a literalist religious state. While in Nigeria, the MSSN's moderation is shaped by its status as a minority in certain sectors (like Southern education). Their "middle path" involves negotiating for religious rights (like the Hijab) within a secular framework, rather than rejecting the state entirely. This study bridges the gap between Southeast Asian (Indonesia) and West African (Nigeria) Islamic discourses, highlighting how the concept (Wasatiyyah) adapts to different colonial legacies. Finally, the study demonstrates that the concept of 'Wasatiyyah' is not just an abstract idea but is manifested through massive social infrastructures like schools and hospitals.

**Keywords:** Wasatiyyah, balance, MSSN, liberalism



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## Introduction

As a principle governing all aspects of human existence, *Wasatiyyah* inherently necessitates a balanced political engagement. This suggests that moderation is not limited to personal piety but extends to the public sphere, requiring the application of ethical balance to governance and social justice. From a holistic Islamic perspective, political consciousness is an essential component of human agency and moral maturity. This is often understood through the exegesis of Qur'an 47:36, which describes worldly life (*al-ḥayāt al-dunyā*) as 'play and amusement' (*la'ibun wa-lahwun*). To excel in both the current life and the hereafter, the individual must actively engage in the 'societal field,' utilising it as a site for continuous moral self-regulation. This necessitates a perpetual negotiation between the extremes of excess and deficiency, thereby manifesting the essence of *Wasatiyyah* through disciplined self-control. The principle of moderation and balance is further reinforced in Qur'an 28:77, which enjoins the believer to prioritise the pursuit of the goodness of the hereafter (*al-Dār al-Ākhirah*) while simultaneously cautioning against the neglect of one's temporal allotment of goodness in this world. This verse identifies a normative framework for *Wasatiyyah*, wherein religious aspiration does not necessitate the renunciation of material existence. It is necessary to maintain an active engagement with temporal well-being, which is essential for achieving the 'Balanced Life' (*al-Ḥayāt al-Wasat*). Having in mind that one still has a place to thrive in this life implies the idea of being inclusive and pluralistic with one's neighbours in this life.

The idea of inclusion and pluralism is an ontological imperative, derived from the reality that human existence is fundamentally communal. As we are not the only inhabitants of this world, the presence of the 'religious other' as a neighbour necessitates a framework of social cohesion. The concept of 'neighbour' in this context transcends immediate proximity, encompassing an extensive social continuum that cuts across the domestic sphere of family and friends to the broader categories of the stranger. This neighbourly duty operates across multiple scales, bridging local districts and urban centres with the transnational and intercontinental realities of a globalised world. Hence, we are not the only inhabitants of this earth.

This further implies that within an inclusive framework, leadership is not bound by geographic or racial exclusivity. By citing Qur'an 7:128, wherein the Prophet Moses (AS) affirms that 'the earth belongs to Allah and He grants heritage to whomever He wills among His servants,' one can argue for a theocentric meritocracy. This suggests that political authority is a divine trust (*Amanah*) that may be inherited by any capable member of the human community, regardless of their origin. It suggests that political authority within a pluralistic society is not restricted by confessional identity, potentially encompassing Muslim, Christian, or Jewish leadership. Recognising this reality, the individual must adopt a *Wasatiyyah* framework to navigate the complex interactions between the governing and the governed within a diverse sociopolitical landscape. In a nutshell, as *Wasatiyyah* encompasses moderation across the entirety of the human experience, the individual must cultivate a rigorous ethical discipline. This involves a continuous process of self-regulation to successfully navigate the tensions between the two extremes of excess and deficiency.

Furthermore, the actualisation of *Wasatiyyah* has become increasingly complex in the contemporary era, as actors often employ strategic diplomacy to navigate globalized interrelations. A vast body of scholarship has emerged to evaluate whether Islamic organisations are effectively upholding the principles of moderation or are merely implementing them as a pragmatic façade. Specifically, the religious moderation of the Indonesian Islamic organization, Muhammadiyah, in its civil society has been extensively studied by several scholars (Burhani, 2018). Hence, this study also aims to describe and compare the mechanisms through which the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) and Muhammadiyah negotiate their moderate stance within the complex intersections of pluralism, liberalism, and Islamism. This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing a comparative historical method to examine the development of both organizations. The

primary analytical framework is content analysis, which is applied to scholarly publications and scriptural exegeses to identify recurring themes of *Wasatiyyah*. Consequently, this study maintains that Muhammadiyah's organization and the Muslim Student Society of Nigeria are mostly similar in their moderate attitude in the context of Islamism and pluralism. However, their moderation differs in the context of liberalism. A study of this nature is indispensable for scholars exploring the multidimensional expressions of *Wasatiyyah* across different geographies. Furthermore, it provides essential insights for academic cohorts on maintaining contextual agility within moderate frameworks, particularly when navigating the transition between disparate socio-religious environments.

By and large, this study proceeds to establish a comprehensive conceptual framework for *Wasatiyyah*, exploring its broader theological implications within the Islamic tradition. Subsequently, the research explores the operationalisation of moderation within Muhammadiyah and the MSSN, respectively. Through a comparative analysis of these two organizations, the study identifies their institutional convergences and divergences, ultimately offering normative recommendations for the future trajectory of moderate Islamic discourse.

### Conceptualization of Wasatiyyah

Literally, '*Wasatiyyah*' is an Arabic word which is derived from the root word '*w-s-t*', meaning middle. Further etymological derivatives include the verb *tawassata*, which denotes the act of occupying a central position, and *tawsīt*, a verbal noun signifying the mediation of an object or its division into two equal parts. Crucially, the term *wasat* conveys the dual meaning of 'centrality' and 'justice,' as evidenced in Q. 100:5, where it describes physical placement, and Q. 2:143, where it establishes the ethical and communal excellence of the *Ummah* (al-Rāzī, 1999). The derivatives also include *Wāsīta*, which means an intermediary or a functional means through which an end is achieved, and *Wasīt*, which signifies an arbiter, broker, or mediator (Lane, 1893). To sum it up, '*Wasatiyyah*' denotes the concept of moderation. It is the middle of something. It denotes a balance between two things. It also means justice that can only be achieved by maintaining a halving or moderate position.

Within the framework of Islamic scholarship, the concept of *Wasatiyyah* is scripturally rooted in the Qur'anic text and further elaborated through the Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*). As previously indicated, the terminological basis for *Wasatiyyah* is derived from Surah al-*Ādiyāt* (Q. 100:5) and Surah al-Baqarah (Q. 2:143), where the 'middle way' is established as a defining characteristic of the Muslim community.

This concept is further substantiated by Surah al-Qalam (Q. 68:28), where its superlative form *Awsat* is employed to signify the 'best' among a group. Similarly, the Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*) provides critical linguistic evidence for these gradations. For instance, in Sahih al-Bukhari, the root is used to refer to spatial centrality, such as *Wasṭ* (the middle) in Hadith 6272, and the anatomical designation *Wuṣṭā* (the middle finger) in Hadith 5301. Most significantly, Hadith 4487 explicitly equates *Wasat* with justice ('*Adl*'), thereby adding weight to the transition from a literal 'middle' to a moral and ethical 'excellence' (al-Bukhari, 1993).

The analysis of *Wasatiyyah* through the lens of the Prophetic tradition corroborates the preliminary findings at the outset of this study. To further espouse the Islamic conceptualization of the term, Sallabi (2010), drawing upon the exegesis of Imam al-Ṭabarī, posits that *Wasatiyyah* is derived from the root *w-s-t*, which signifies 'the best' (*Khiyār*). This is exemplified by the Qur'anic usage of *Awsat* to denote the most distinguished individuals among a group." As *Wasatiyyah* also denotes a position between two extremes, al-Sallabi (2010) identifies a tripartite framework consisting of *Ifrāt* (excess), *Tafrīt* (deficiency), and *al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm* (the straight path). In this ethical topology, *Ifrāt* and *Tafrīt* represent the deviant extremes of over-

zealousness and negligence, respectively, while the 'Straight Path' serves as the balanced axis of theological and moral uprightness.

*Wasatiyyah* is inherently linked to the concept of divine guidance. In Qur'an 2:143, Allah characterizes the community of believers as *Ummatan Wasaṭan*, a term interpreted to signify the 'best' or 'most justly balanced' nation. In juxtaposing Islamic religiosity with that of Judaism and Christianity, Muslims occupy a theological equilibrium between the doctrinal extremes of these two traditions. For instance, Sallabi (2010) states that in the discourse of religious ethics, Islamic moderation is well understood between the *lex talionis* traditionally associated with Jewish jurisprudence and the unconditional pacifism characteristic of early Christian thought. While the former is perceived within this framework as emphasizing rigorous retribution, the latter is viewed as practising an extreme leniency or doctrinal fluidity that risks compromising the boundaries of religious identity. Islam takes the middle position, which is the tolerance between rigorous retribution and extreme leniency. Thus, this kind of moderation and the middle position between the two extremes is the divine guidance '*Hidaayah*'.

Also, a significant interpretive dimension of *Wasatiyyah* is *al-Iqtisād* (prudent management). Within this framework, the capacity for systematic self-regulation is also an essential prerequisite for achieving success in the path of moderation. This 'management' is basically exercised while being steadfast in a moderate position, requiring a rigorous internal discipline—or a 'taming' of the self—to ensure that one's moderate posture remains resilient against the pull of extremes.

Furthermore, the concept of *Wasatiyyah* encompasses the principle of *al-Ma'rūf*, which facilitates the critical accommodation of indigenous cultures, customs, and norms. This is to recognize and respect the universal virtues embedded within local traditions. Where cultural practices align with the broader objectives of ethical goodness, they are to be integrated into the Islamic social fabric as a manifestation of contextualised moderation. Hence, moderation here functions as a mechanism of normative discernment, which is to identify and internalise the constructive elements of a culture while systematically renouncing its deleterious aspects.

Having known that the straight path is the balance between negligence and overdoing, this suggests that creatures around us can maintain their true attributes, "*Wasatiy* attributes". For instance, a man, as one of the creatures, would always remain a man as long as he maintains a balance in what he eats. If he eats less, which is tantamount to malnutrition, or eats nothing, he will no longer be a man; he will die of disease or hunger. What happened to him is negligence '*Tafriṭ*'. If he always eats more than what is required, the food would not be digested, he would lose nutrients, and he might get to the stage of too much purging, which, if care is not taken, he might lose all his bodily water through purging, and he could lose his life. What happened here is called overdoing, '*Ifrāt*'. *Wasatiyyah*, which is *Sirāt al-Mustaqīm*, is the culture of moderate eating; it is a middle culture that would protect one from malnutrition that stems from less eating and overeating. Hence, leaning towards either of the two extremes, overdoing or negligence, is blameworthy.

Recognizing that the 'Straight Path' (*al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm*) also represents the balance between negligence and excess, it follows that the ontological integrity of a being is contingent upon maintaining its '*Wasatiy* attributes.' For example, the biological and functional essence of a human being is preserved through physiologic balance. A state of *Tafriṭ* (deficiency), such as chronic malnutrition, leads to physiological decay and eventual death. Conversely, *Ifrāt* (excess), manifested through over-consumption, disrupts digestive harmony and triggers pathological crises. Thus, *Wasatiyyah* acts as a preservative measure; it is the moderate culture that protect the individual from the existential risks of both extremes, rendering any deviation from this mean as ethically and physically blameworthy.

Furthermore, al-Sallabi (2010) states the essential characteristics of *Wasatiyyah*. These features represent the teleological objectives sought by moral agents in their pursuit of 'balance'. Specifically, these attributes include moral excellence (*Khayriyyah*), equity ('*Adl*'), facilitation or the mitigation of hardship (*Taysir*), wisdom (*Hikmah*), consistency, and intermediacy (*Bayniyyah*).

In any operationalisation of moderation, the primary objectives remain the attainment of moral excellence and the realization of tangible benefits (*Maṣlahah*) at the conclusion of that endeavour. And if justice is to be served between two conflicting individuals, the one who wants to serve justice will not lean towards either of the two parties. If he does so, there will not be balance in the justice, and therefore he will become unjust. With operationalisation of moderation, one can eliminate unease and restore ease. For instance, a prompt payment of wages to those who render services is a form of eliminating unease. Paying the labourers on time eliminates the delay in getting their money. With moderation, the practitioner can also attain a level of prudential wisdom (*Hikmah*) that is essential for navigating volatile or high-stakes environments. By employing the principle of intermediacy (*Bayniyyah*), a moral agent can resist the pressure of impulsive decision-making, instead formulating responses that are both measured and judicious. Furthermore, wisdom dictates that moderation is not a static point but a contextual variable; its successful application requires rigorous logical deduction and situational awareness to discern the 'middle path' appropriate to specific circumstances

At this juncture, Sallabi (2010) posits that the culture of moderation generates a dual manifestation of wisdom: theoretical and practical. The former refers to the internal intellectual apprehension of moderate principles, whereas the latter denotes the external application of those principles in real-world scenarios. This process unfolds in three distinct stages. The primary stage involves the equitable distribution of rights and obligations (*al-Huqūq*), ensuring that every stakeholder receives their due measure. This stage necessitates a rigorous temporal discipline, where obligations are discharged at the appropriate juncture without procrastination. The emphasis here is on distributive justice, establishing a foundational balance before proceeding to more complex ethical applications.

The second stage involves an axiological recognition of Divine Justice ('*Adl*'), specifically regarding God's wisdom in establishing the retributive, cosmic, and natural laws that govern the universe. The third stage is possession of foresight. The third stage is characterised by the attainment of intellectual acumen and foresight. This is a state of epistemic depth where knowledge is not merely possessed but experienced as a profound insight. This stage is viewed as a divine gift, primarily manifested in the Prophets and their successors. It is in this stage that inviting others to faith is appropriately practised. Having established the theological parameters of moderation within the framework of Islamic studies, it is now imperative to explore the concept through the lens of Western intellectual discourse. The following are the philosophical traditions that have shaped the Western understanding of the '*Wasatiyyah*' and its contemporary sociopolitical applications.

### Concepts of Wasatiyyah: Politics of Moderation

Haan & Lock (2019) contend that moderation is the golden mean (*Aurea Mediocritas*). It is the middle way that is sought after, in the middle between two extremes. It is sought after, in the middle of excess and deficiency. It has played a significant role in political thought since ancient times. However, according to Aristotle, there can be no excess or deficiency to balance in matters like temperance and justice when confronting evil and malice.

It is noteworthy that moderation as a golden mean is also a virtue in essence. In essence, by doing. Having discovered that moderation as the golden mean is also a virtue by doing, how do we identify it? According

to De Haan and Locke (2019), Aristotle asserted that to identify the mean, it must depend on the extremes between the middle way. Aristotle brought the instances that there is temperance between pleasure and pain, there is greatness of soul between honour and dishonour, there is confidence between fear and confidence, there is liberality between giving and getting, and there is righteous indignation between envy and malice. The golden mean, as in moderation, between these habits here, is virtuous. Having learnt that different habits define a different kind of moderation, this means that moderation has different contexts, and thus, its definition generally would be impossible.

To expatiate this further, Aristotle applied the concept of the golden mean to the political structure of society. He asserted that in order to have the best governed society, the middle-class people must be relied on, because they are the golden mean, the middle way between the rich and poor, which are two extremes. The rich are of the habit of insolence and pride, and the poor are of the habits of malice and humility. It is only the middle class that would have reasoning as their habit, and with their reasoning, they will be able to understand both of them. Aristotle recommends the midway habits for the rulers governing the society, that to be politically prudent, they must uphold justice, clemency, generosity, humility and temperance.

Also, the virtue of moderation is very useful in times of trouble. It is closely connected to the act of tolerance, as a way to endure conflict in the religious unrest and as a step to reconcile the two conflicting opponents.

Sometimes, moderation is perceived to be a negative characteristic. That is, a moderate person may be skilful in the art of compromise between opposing groups of people. With the skills he will be able to neutralize the fanaticism and bigotry in them, he will be able to stand independently from a moral point of view. Thus, he becomes a traitor.

Lastly, it is said that moderation has a double nature. It is there to have control over political opposition and, at the same time, to tame the passions. According to De Haan and Locke (2019), the term moderation is a cornerstone of an “imperial vernacular” and a colonial principle to control the world.

### **Muhammadiyah and Its Moderate Relations in Indonesian Civil Society**

The organization of Muhammadiyah are believed to be the followers of Prophet Muhammad SAW. The organization was founded by Shaykh Ahmad Dahlan on November 18, 1912, in the city of Yogyakarta. The primary goal of the organization is to renew the Islamic teachings and advance the Muslims in Indonesia. The organization has been observed as an example of a successful blend between Islamism and the modernity. According to Burhani (2018), they adopted the Islamic theological view of Shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah and that of the modernist, Muhammad Abduh. Since the fall of Sir Soeharto in 1998, Muhammadiyah has often been perceived as having a more conservative bent. That's why it is sometimes called Indonesian Wahhabism. Muhammadiyah movement has 177 universities, 2604 elementary schools, 1722 middle schools, 745 high schools, 546 vocational schools, 160 Pesantren, as well as hundreds of hospitals and other health institutions. The Key roles played mainly by this movement throughout the history of Indonesia are: religious reform movement, as a political force and as a social movement.

As a religious reform movement, the focus of Muhammadiyah is to call the Muslims of Indonesia to a pure and pristine Islam. Impurity of faith is believed to be the cause of backwardness in the country. To implement this, they adopt the strict theological stance of shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah and a modernised theological stance of Muhammad Abduh. Using these theologies, the organization was able to have its objectives of reforms within the Muslims in the country well spelt out. Also, as part of their religious activities blended with the social ones, and despite having friendly relations with the Christians from the beginning, they were there, along with other Muslim organizations in Indonesia, to form together as resistance to Christianity, especially the Christian missions.

As a political force, the role the movement played is that it cooperated with authorities throughout most of the movement's history. Burhani (2018) submits that the movement has refused to side with any political party, but its members have always tried to get involved in state politics. However, the movement still tries to continue to distance itself from state politics. During the reign of Ahmad Shafii, the movement advised its members that they should keep a healthy distance from all state politics and the political parties.

As a social movement, social activities are the main focus of the Muhammadiyah movement. The organization have 4 systems in their social activities. The systems are educational activities, health services, social welfare activities, and economic activities. However, their economic activities have been that it failed to match their social activities, as fewer of their economic activities have been recorded. But the strength of Muhammadiyah still lies in these social activities, rather than in its religious reforms. As Muhammadiyah's roles in Indonesia have been discussed, it is of high significance to discuss their attitude of moderation in the Indonesian civil society.

### **Muhammadiyah's Moderation in Indonesian Civil Society**

Having discussed the organization's roles in terms of health systems, educational systems and their religion's mission in the country, the organization also have its attitude of moderation towards the idea of Islamism, liberalism, and pluralism. Between Islamism, liberalism and pluralism, the organization has been characterized as moderate Muslims in terms of religiosity. The concept of moderation, in the contemporary Indonesian context, is often seen as the midway between extreme-liberalism and the extreme-Islamism.

Muhammadiyah, as an Islamist movement have been trying to develop a real Islamic community via its objectives of reform (*Masyarakat Islam yang sebenar-benarnya*). But by balancing between the objectives and those of the state, Nashir (2019) observed that almost 80% of Muhammadiyah leaders choose Pancasila as the final ideology of Indonesia. The percentage of 79.7% shows that most of the Muhammadiyah leaders prefer nationalism over pan-Islamism or trans-nationalism. Nashir (2019) discovered that a significant majority of Muhammadiyah leadership regards the caliphate as a utopian construct rather than a practical political goal. This empirical finding highlights a theological divergence from the classical Islamist paradigm of *al-Din wa al-Dawlah*; instead, the movement prioritizes a socio-cultural agenda as the primary vehicle for achieving its reformist objectives within the framework of the nation-state.

Moreover, on Sharia, as a legal system of Islamism, the survey conducted by Burhani (2018) shows that Muhammadiyah is neutral. The organization's three main pillars of their Islamic shari'ah can be inferred as thus, namely, Islam (the Quran and hadiths), modernity, and nationality (*keindonesiaan*). In terms of education and the economy, Muhammadiyah prefers a conventional system to the Shari'ah one. According to Burhani (2018), on transnationalism, the organization just focused on purifying the society because of the belief that Indonesian society is backwards due to a lack of purity. However, the caliphate was said to be never important to the leaders, as almost 80% of them chose Pancasila as the final ideology of Indonesia.

Also, the organization's moderate attitude towards plurality can be perceived in their thematic exegesis on religious texts. Muhammadiyah published a controversial Tafsir book, in which one of its controversial topics is the promotion of inter-religious marriages and pluralism. Inside the controversial exegesis is also the claim of salvation for the adherents of other religions. As a result of this, some of the members within the organization rose against and opposed this new interpretation of the Quran, until the organization was pressured to stop circulating it and withdrew the publication (Burhani, 2018). Muhammadiyah's pluralism in religion became more predominant under the leader Din Shamsu Din (Burhani, 2018). Din Shamsu Din announced that all of the organization's facilities can be used for Christmas celebrations except mosques. Regarding this pluralistic and controversial statement of this leader, the attitude of all the Muhammadiyah

members towards pluralism in Indonesian Java and non-Java can be well captured. It is noteworthy that nearly 50% of the leaders in Java agreed with the stance. In Sumatra and the small islands surrounding it, almost four-fifths of the leaders rejected that idea. This shows that there are cultural differences between the two regions and that Javanese Muhammadiyah is more inclusive than in other regions of Indonesia.

In addition, on the moderate attitude of the organization towards liberalism, according to Burhani (2018), over the years, Muhammadiyah has become an ideological battleground between liberal and puritan ideas. *Jaringan Intelektual Muda Muhammadiyah* (JIMM), which happened to be a subgroup of Muhammadiyah, later emerged and became more liberal. The intensity of this subgroup's liberalism drives them to radically promote the new interpretation of the Quran using the modern philosophical method of hermeneutics. Due to this, they are accused of promoting freethinking in Indonesia. JIL (Jaringan Islam Liberal, Liberal Islam Network) is also another subgroup that was founded in 2001. The purpose of creating this subgroup is for the young liberal Muhammadiyah members and whoever adheres to liberalism in Indonesia. However, the Liberal Islam Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal or JIL) faced significant backlash from segments of society. Some opponents used a derogatory play on the group's acronym, reinterpreting JIL as *Jaringan Iblis Laknatullah* (Satan's Network, God curse them!), to signal their total rejection of the group's liberal theology (Burhani, 2011). While Javanese society has a deep-seated tradition of religious pluralism, its response to liberal Islamic subgroups has been complex. In recent decades, a conservative shift within the Javanese heartland has led to increased friction, with many traditionalist and modernist segments alike viewing the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) as a threat to established theological boundaries (Ali, 2005; Lanti et al., 2020).

Having perused the Muhammadiyah's moderate attitude vis-à-vis the Indonesian civil society, it is safe to say that the organization is pragmatic in their moderation. They find their midway, which is the golden mean, by weighing between liberalism and puritanism. As the organization maintains a middle position between liberalism and Islamism, it is very sensitive to ideological change. Burhani (2018) submits that a survey shows that the majority of the members are moderate, while a few are liberals and fundamentalists. Hence, the organization has been proven to be moderate in practice, but conservative in Belief. For instance, they believe polygamy is permitted in Islam, but the majority of the members don't practice it.

Furthermore, according to Nashir et al (2019), the organization remains a cornerstone of moderate and progressive Islam as a means of spreading a specific message rather than as a political party. In the 2019 General Election, Muhammadiyah did not officially support any presidential candidate or specific political party; it chose a *Wasatiyy* stance. But some of its members actively participate in the state political parties and campaigns for the party candidates. Lastly, Nashir (2019) observed that Muhammadiyah need political clarity. He suggested that the way forward is that the organization should remain active, offering a counterweight to the political power, networks, and activities of other countries.

### **Nigeria's Muslim Student Society of Nigeria and Wasatiyyah**

The Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) was founded in 1954 in Lagos. According to Balogun (2022), the idea of founding MSSN and its activities was initiated by Tajudeen Aromashodu, a student at Methodist Boys High School in Lagos, inspired by a distant Muslim Students' Society in Myanmar. He discovered the Myanmar Muslim student society in a magazine called Islamic Review. Aromashodu, together with other students, namely, Lateef Adegbite, Rahmon Sahid and Akin Laguda, brainstormed on this new idea. Hence, they sought the guidance of the Myanmar Muslim students' society and thus the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria got established. MSSN, as a new organization, just wanted to have its primary goal focused on advocating for the Islamic identity of the younger Muslim students in the country's educational institutions, until they become graduates.

Over time, the organization's objectives increased. They were now more interested in promoting the Islamic identity of Muslims in the largely Christian dominated colonial schools in Yorubaland. Christian students' organisations, such as Scripture Union (SU) and SCM, which originated in the United Kingdom, had already been very active in the colonial schools. To balance these religious activities, young Muslims were mobilized across Nigeria to promote Qur'an memorization, Education, modest dressing and Sharia among young Nigerian Muslim students. Some Muslim parents and the Christians in the country had been tolerating the MSSN's objectives until the 1960s. But from the late 1970s, when the MSSN began to hammer on, on the revival of prophetic traditions '*Sunnah*' and to encourage female students to wear hijab, many Muslims and Christians in the southwestern side of Nigeria began to accuse the organization of extremism, and as a result of this, they changed their attitude towards it, and the organisation became unwelcome to them. The Muslims and Christians in the North tolerated the new objectives of MSSN, but they believed that introducing such new dress was against the secular system of the country's schooling system.

It is noteworthy that MSSN has enjoyed more political support in the north than in the Southwest. This is because Muslims are the most dominant in the Northern political offices. By the year 1975, according to Balogun (2022), the objectives of MSSN had changed from religious and educational to socio-political matters. As the country's system has been transferred to the democratic system of governance from the military system, a call to Sharia was also introduced by the organization. By the year 2000, twelve Northern Muslim-dominated states welcomed the idea of Sharia into their state governance.

While in the Southwest and the Middle belt of Nigeria, where there is a significant presence of Christian groups like the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), and some minor Muslim groups, the idea of Sharia is opposed and rejected.

In addition, MSSN had also gradually shifted to a reformist organization that made it to review and modified many aspects of its initial objectives and orientation to Islam. This shift was caused by both internal and external factors. As caused by the external factor, MSSN got associated and influenced with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) and the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations.

As the MSSN organization had gone through many struggles that ranged from social to religious ones, they were able to harmonise Muslims of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds successfully in postcolonial Nigeria. This was achieved as a result of their nonstop emphasis on the common challenges Muslims face in Nigeria, especially from Christianity and the country's colonial legacies. Another success by the MSSN organization is the introduction of Islamic practices in the government public schools that are dominated by Christians, particularly in the southwest. Muslims in these schools were now able to perform prayers led by either students or Muslim teachers publicly on school grounds (Balogun, 2022).

Regarding social activities of the organization, they were able to introduce female students to the organization's special programmes for the female Muslim Students, called "the Sisters' Circle" to aid in Islamic education and interaction among women. In these programmes, topics such as modest dressing, proper interaction with men and maintenance of good hygiene are discussed. Also, the organization consider their students who later emerged as Muslim professionals and political elites, some of whom are governors and lawmakers, to be part of their success. However, the success of MSSN in the Southwest lies in religious and social activities. It is just that they weren't able to produce professionals like in the North, despite the large followership. The success of MSSN in the South-east and South-south regions, where Christianity is the dominant religion, when compared with that of North and Southwest, is very little. Their activities are mostly limited to a few schools (Balogun, 2022).

Having traced the MSSN organization's activities in Nigeria that range from religious to socio-political matters, and the religious moderation is the bedrock of this article's discourse, it is significant to discuss the organization's attitude towards Islamism, pluralism and liberalism vis-à-vis the Indonesian organization, Muhammadiyah. And to also discuss their attitude vis-à-vis the Islamic Moderation Index of Sallabi (2010), which are: goodness, facilitating ease and removal of hardship, justice, wisdom, consistency, middling and weighing between two different extremes.

On Islamism, although the MSSN's main philosophy is puritan, just like the Muhammadiyah. However, Nigeria's status in terms of democracy would not provide an avenue to judge whether MSSN are moderate in their dealings or not. It has been observed that Nigeria, after its independence in 1960, is left with colonial and Christian missionary legacies. When it comes to sectors like education and government, Muslims were not free to express and practice their faith. Young Muslims in the Christian dominated educational sectors were discriminated against, despite the country's constitution has the right to practice and express faith freely. To remediate this issue, MSSN stood up and was able to get the rights for the discriminated against in some schools that Christians dominate. Although the organisation had attempted to introduce Sharia to the country. Unlike Muhammadiyah, they have a long-standing longing for the introduction of Sharia because they believe that operating the administration of the country is possible. While most Muhammadiyah members in Indonesia believe that using Sharia as the state constitution is not possible in this modern period.

Moreso, on pluralism, unlike Indonesia, where the Muslims are considered as the most populous, and it is expected of them to be tolerant with the minor adherents of other religions in the country, in Nigeria, it is the agents of colonialists and Christians that are expected to be tolerant in their dealings with the Muslims of the country. Christian dominated schools are constantly persuaded to be pluralist and accommodate the activities of the Muslim students in their institutions, as the country operates with secular law. After several MSSNs' struggles, some Christian dominated schools have started tolerating the activities of Muslim students in their schools, while others have disallowed them. Hence, it is noteworthy that Muhammadiyah of Indonesia, which is regarded as one of the dominant Muslim organization in Indonesia have been tolerant with other adherents of religion like the Christians celebrating Christmas using all of the organization's facilities except mosques.

On liberalism, as Muhammadiyah reflected their liberal tendencies in some of their social status like dumping polygamy, despite that, they still acknowledge it to be part of the principles of Islam. MSSN members, especially the graduates, maintain a moderate position regarding the polygamous issues like this. Some of the members are not polygamous because of the secular and socio-economic status of the country.

## Conclusion

While both Muhammadiyah and the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN) share a common theological root in puritanical reformism, their interpretations of *Wasatiyyah* (moderation) diverge based on their socio-political environments: Muhammadiyah utilizes a pragmatic moderation to harmonize Islam with the Indonesian political system, whereas the MSSN employs a reformist moderation centred on identity advocacy and the protection of Muslim rights within a pluralistic democracy. The two organizations exhibit that *Wasatiyyah* can function as a form of institutionalized piety. Rather than remaining a purely abstract idea, it is operationalized through tangible social infrastructures – such as expansive networks of schools and hospitals. These institutions serve as the physical manifestation of the 'middle path,' providing a moderate alternative to state-led services and sectarianism alike. By and large, Muhammadiyah and the MSSN suggest that the future of Islamic moderation lies not in the perfection of its definitions, but in the resilience of its

institutions, proving that *Wasatiyyah* is less a static theological destination than a dynamic, perpetual journey of social negotiation.

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