

Weber's Theory of Charismatic Leadership: The Case of Muslim Leaders in Contemporary Indonesian Politics

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Abstract

In Economy and Society, Max Weber created three models of legitimacy for the topic of political obligation and why one should obey the state: tradition, charisma, and legal-rational. The second model is personalistic and emphasizes the right and power of a "special" individual, which Weber identifies as "charisma." This article explores the meaning and types of "charisma" by applying features of Weber's theory of "charismatic leadership" to Muslim leaders in contemporary Indonesian politics. It offers an analysis of how Weber's notions might inform how we generally think about Muslim intellectuals, politicians or government officials, organization leaders, and scholars. In addition to its applications, this article identifies limitations of Weber's theories and potential areas in need of further research. Investigating the relationship between "charisma" and leadership in a specific country case can offer insights for clarifying certain political concepts and shaping future theory-building, data collection, and testing.

Keywords: Indonesia, Islam, leadership, political theory, Weber

1. Introduction

When political scientists explain political phenomena in Indonesia and elsewhere, they often use structural or institutional explanations and variables such as the party system, electoral configurations, regime types, or a state's economic position. While these factors are important, the historical memory of the people does not usually record a particular electoral rule, judicial decision, or trade agreement as catalysts of change. Rather, it is leaders who guide, organize, mobilize, and generally influence life at the local, provincial, and national levels. This does not mean we should solely rely on the "great man" theory of leadership in which "great men" make history and are the main or only causes of real, intended social change (Burns, 1978, p. 51). Leaders do in fact operate within structural and institutional contexts, but it can be useful to also have case studies about leadership if we want to understand human behavior and events more completely. In that vein, this article examines the application and limitations of Max Weber's theory of charismatic leadership for Muslim leaders in contemporary Indonesian politics.

2. Leadership and Charisma

"Leadership" is a term that has numerous definitions and connotations. A leader may be defined by who he or she is (the personal) and by the responsibilities, obligations, and tasks he or she is charged with (the position). Leaders' authority can be great or limited and their legitimacy can rest on moral, rational, or practical foundations. Social psychologists distinguish between "affective" and "instrumental" leadership. "Affective" refers to maintaining a group and good relations among members, while "instrumental" deals with advancing a group in the performance of a common objective or task. Depending on the nature of the organization, leaders can be labeled as affective, instrumental, or both. Leadership can be further classified as "transactional" such as opinion, group, party, legislative, or executive leadership or "transforming" like that of reform, revolutionary, heroic, or ideological leadership, terms that James MacGregor Burns includes in his book *Leadership* (1978, pp. vii-viii and 4).

One particular kind of leadership is “charismatic leadership.” Like leadership in general, charismatic leadership has a wide range of definitions, especially since “charisma” has varied meanings in different cultural and temporal settings. Setting aside normative judgments about whether a leader is good or bad, just or not, and moral or immoral, one might say that there is something about certain leaders that make them unique and exceptional. This “something” has been the subject of serious intellectual debates and Max Weber paved much of the way in terms of identifying this special something as “charisma.” His theories laid important groundwork for how we might think about and understand charismatic leadership.

When Max Weber explored the topic of political obligation and why one should obey the state in *Economy and Society*, which was published posthumously in 1922, he made contrary points to the traditional arguments of the time (1978). He did not think self-interest (material, economic), fear (against punishment mostly), and habit or socialization were legitimate reasons for obeying the state. Weber instead believed that we obey because of validity, meaning that the state or authority is perceived to be good, right, or just. We evaluate the state as an order that is good and therefore obey, but we make such evaluations subjectively. In an effort to understand and classify these subjective approaches, Weber created three models of legitimacy: tradition, charisma, and legal-rational (1978). The first focuses on past behavior, which gives validity and meaning to the present laws and state. The second is personalistic and emphasizes the right and power of a “special” individual. The third points to instrumental rationality, which is choosing the appropriate means for particular ends while acting in accordance with utility. It is in *Chapter 14: Charisma and Its Transformations* that Weber explicitly discusses the details of the second model. Weber begins his chapter on charisma with the following claim:

All *extraordinary* needs, i.e., those which *transcend* the sphere of everyday economic routines, have always been satisfied in an entirely heterogeneous manner: on a *charismatic* basis... It means the following: that the “natural” leaders in moments of distress – whether psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political – were neither appointed officeholders nor “professionals” in the present-day sense (i.e., persons performing against compensation a “profession” based on training and special expertise), but rather the bearers of specific gifts of body and mind that were considered “supernatural” (in the sense that not everybody could have access to them). (pp. 1111-1112)

Charisma in this context is value-free, however. Weber was more concerned with whether leaders “proved their charisma in the eyes of their adherents” than value judgments (p. 1112). Weber continues his chapter by outlining the precise features of charismatic leadership. He notes that charisma is “often most evident in the religious realm,” but not exclusively found there (p. 1112). Charisma “knows no formal and regulated appointment or dismissal, no career, advancement, or salary, no supervisory or appeals body, no local or purely technical jurisdiction, and no permanent institutions in the manner of bureaucratic agencies” (p. 1112). Furthermore, charisma is a “highly individual quality” (p. 1113). Robert Tucker adds that in Weber’s usage, “the possessor of charismatic authority, who may be a religious, political, military, or other kind of leader, is in essence a savior-leader – or one perceived as such” (1977, p. 388). Tucker explains that a leader “who comes forward in a distressful situation and presents himself or herself in a convincing way to the sufferers as one who can lead them out of their distress by virtue of special personal characteristics or formula for salvation may arouse their intense loyalty and enthusiastic willingness to take the path the leader is pointing out” (p. 388). Furthermore, “charismatic leadership carries potential hazards as well as benefits” depending on the time, place, and what means and ends are involved (p. 388). This is because for Weber, the charismatic leader goes against tradition, generates new things, and changes points of reference or frameworks, but can also be subversive, irrational, and unstable. In addition, there is a focus on the present moment. Charismatic leadership therefore carries within itself its own demise for it cannot last forever. There are eventually problems with the routinization and succession of charisma. In order to understand charismatic leadership more fully beyond what has been presented so far, particularly with regard to its appeal and limitations, the next section delves more deeply into the psychological, social, and relational dimensions of charismatic leadership.

3. The Psychological, Social, and Relational Dimensions of Charismatic Leadership

Interpretations and criticisms of Weber’s work on charismatic leadership come in a multitude of forms. Praise, rejection, or changes to his theories depend on the extent to which one agrees or disagrees with how Weber understood the psychological, social, and relational dimensions of charismatic leadership.

Though Weber emphasizes the psychological component of charisma more than social and relational factors, there are elements of the latter two spread throughout his work. What is proposed here is a triangulation of the psychological, social, and relational aspects in order to create a more nuanced description of charismatic leadership. First, the psychological dimension of charismatic leadership refers to the internal (or personal) and “natural” qualities attributed to an individual leader. Here, charisma is defined “as a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional powers or qualities” (Schweitzer, 1974, p. 151). According to Martin Spencer, Weber’s concept of charisma has been used in at least three senses: “(a) the supernatural ‘gift’ of the leader, (b) charisma as a sacred or revered essence deposited in objects or persons, (c) charisma as the attractiveness of a personality” (1973, p. 352). This exceptional quality is found in a specific individual person. The origin of charisma is somewhat elusive, though. Just where the “gift” comes from is debatable. Is it genetic, learned, or acquired by some other process? Weber claims that the gift can come from some divine being or certain physical and mental states induced by drugs or disease (e.g., epilepsy). He does not go into detail about the origins of charisma, presumably because what matters most for him is that charisma exists in the eyes of leaders and followers, hence his statement that charisma must be used in a value-free sense (p. 1112).

Second, the social dimension of charismatic leadership refers to possible external factors that contribute to an individual rising to a position of authority and power. In other words, charismatic leadership may have social sources. For example, family, school, media, work, and communities based on certain cultural identities can influence whether or not an individual becomes a leader and the nature of that leadership once that person is in power. Charisma also undergoes a transformation over time. It becomes depersonalized through the process of routinization. Routinization comes about because of the “desire to transform charisma and charismatic blessing from a unique, transitory gift of grace of extraordinary times and persons into a permanent possession of everyday life” (Weber, 1978, p. 1121).” The leader, disciples, and charismatic subjects all seek to “maintain the purity of the spirit.” In efforts to maintain the status quo and in light of the need to find “a successor to the prophet, hero, teacher or party leader,” people merge the forces of charisma and tradition. For Weber, the charismatic message becomes “dogma, doctrine, theory, reglement, law or petrified tradition” (pp. 1122-1123). Charisma “becomes a legitimation for ‘acquired rights’” and essentially changes from a “unique gift of grace” into a quality that is “either (a) transferable or (b) personally acquirable or (c) attached to the incumbent of an office or to an institutional structure regardless of the persons involved” (pp. 1122 and 1135). Charismatic leadership can then find its sources in social factors such as family lineage and political office. Weber states that once charisma becomes an impersonal quality, it can be taught and learned. It may be added that the “monopolization of charismatic education by the well-to-do” (p. 1146) is not only possible, but rather frequent since the upper class and elites are usually the ones who have the time and resources to “cultivate” charisma and leaders.

Third, the relational dimension of charismatic leadership refers to the relationship between the leader and followers. Some authors like Martin Spencer stretch the boundaries of Weber’s theory of charisma and state that it is not just psychological or sociological. Instead, charisma is the “affectual relationship between leader and followers developing as the historical product of the interaction between person and situation” (p. 352). Weber might not have disagreed much on this point, however. In discussing the inherent instability of charismatic authority, Weber notes that followers may abandon a leader if he or she does not deliver promised goods, services, or some other goal for “pure charisma does not recognize any legitimacy other than one which flows from personal strength proven time and again” (p. 1114). Weber explains that charismatic leaders must prove their powers in practice: “He must work miracles, if he wants to be a prophet. He must perform heroic deeds, if he wants to be a warlord. Most of all, his divine mission must prove itself by bringing well-being to his faithful followers; if they do not fare well, he obviously is not the god-sent master” (p. 1114). Charismatic leadership is thus relational because if “the people withdraw their recognition, the master becomes a mere private person” (p. 1115). In this way, charisma may not necessarily be something that an individual leader possesses or perhaps the leader only partially possesses the attribute since there is a dependence on others’ recognition and support.

Finally, Arthur Schweitzer provides a reference table for classifying different forms of charismatic leadership (p. 152). It is constructive for helping us to think more concretely about the combined psychological, social, and relational dimensions of charismatic leadership.

Table 1: Types of Pure Personal Charisma

Types	Examples		
Situation	Military	Magic	Religious
Personality	War Lord	Sorcerer	Prophet
Quality	Great Courage	Ecstasy	Ascetic
Attitude of followers	Hero Worship	Awe, Fear	Reverence
Achievement	Conquest	Oracle	Revelation
Group formation	Daring Soldiers	Sacrificial Community	Community of Disciples
Organization	Armed Forces	Secret Societies	Sects

Schweitzer also condenses Weber's theory into nine propositions (p. 178):

1. *Supernatural*. If a particular personality experiences an inner calling and great self-assurance that enables him to develop exceptional capacities, then these abilities will be recognized by others who feel it as their duty to recognize him as their charismatic leader.
2. *Natural*. The exceptional capacity consists in the self-belief of the personality and his magnetic ability – by means of ecstasy, euphoria, resentment, and political passion – to establish a communal bond between leader and followers.
3. *New style*. The extraordinary ability expresses itself in exemplary living or a new political style that gives direction to his policies and political symbols, which expressions become the hallmark of a charismatic movement, although it falls short of any distinct political or philosophical doctrine.
4. *Mission*. Or the charismatic leader received some special mission containing doctrinal elements that provide the basis for a political program. It becomes the duty of leader and followers to devote their lives to fulfilling this program in the political and possibly also the social spheres of life.
5. *Political types*. Within the political framework, the charismatic leader works mainly through the 'accessibility to the masses' and obtains through their enthusiasm the position of a demagogue satisfied with the mere semblance of power, or as an ideologist committed to his cause, or as a party leader also controlling a political machine, or as a Caesarist leader acclaimed either by civilians or soldiers or both.
6. *Instability*. A charismatic regime is of short duration either because the extraordinary quality is diluted or the emotional anxiety of the followers diminishes so that charisma is usually incapable of creating or maintaining a durable political system.
7. *Revolution*. In situations of 'emotional revolutions' the leader can express the resentment of the disprivileged masses and lead a political revolution or direct a social revolution. More religiously inclined charismatic leaders tend to employ violence only in defense of their religious beliefs or the integrity of their movement.
8. *Violence*. If a charismatically led revolution is successful, then there usually ensues an unintended revolutionary self-destruction because revolutionary violence breeds counter violence by the regular armed forces that destroy the revolutionary regime.
9. *Routinization*. If charismatic movements do come to power peacefully, then they are bound to lose their original purity because the regime requires an administrative staff and economic support which it can obtain only if the charismatic leader becomes a mere figurehead of a primarily bureaucratic and interest-oriented regime.

To what extent are Weber's aforementioned arguments and theories applicable to non-European contexts and to different time periods? Specifically, how might Weber's notions inform how we think about leaders in contemporary Indonesian politics? In addition to its applications, what might be the limitations of Weber's theories and what areas are in need of further research?

4. The Case of Indonesia

Indonesia is a multi-religious country with six official state-recognized religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Christianity (Protestants), Confucianism, Hinduism, and Islam. Between 80-90% of the population are self-identified Muslims. Indonesian Muslims do not practice a homogenous form of the religion, however. While customs and beliefs within Islam vary across the archipelago, the main movements in Indonesian Islam belong to the Sunni branch. Donald Porter (2002) identifies the two major movements in Indonesian Islamic orthodoxy as the *kaummuda* ("young group") or *santrimoderen* (modernists) and *kaumtua* ("old group") or *santrikolot* (the traditionalists) (p. 40).

Two Muslim organizations – Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) – represent these movements. There are many Muslim organizations ranging from small local neighborhood mosques and associations to huge national organizations like Muhammadiyah and NU. There are currently no complete, centralized databases that list all of the country's religious and civil society organizations and as a result, we do not have accurate figures for how many groups exist. Available data is typically scattered and either too broad or centered on specific groups (mostly the national organizations). While there is anthropological and historical work that is more specific to selected smaller, local groups, not much is written that systematically examines group change over time or makes comparisons between diverse groups at different levels together over time and locale. This makes analyzing charismatic leadership, religious organizations, and political participation more difficult, but such attempts are hopefully still worthwhile. Using resources available in English (linguistic limitations duly noted), the rest of this article will concentrate on Muslim leaders and connections to charismatic leadership.

Although categories and labels are not ideal given the complexity and multiplicity of social and political phenomena, they can be useful for conceptual and empirical purposes. Categories and labels can help define and clarify who and what is being discussed. They also aid in determining what may or may not be generalizable to other contexts. In addition, everyday reality consists of categories and labels, i.e., people do not usually talk in the abstract, although the meanings behind the terms they use may themselves be abstract. It then follows that when people think of and talk about religious leaders, specific categories come to mind despite the wide array of backgrounds and experiences. In Indonesia, at least four types of religious leaders exist. Leaders can overlap categories, however, and so future research needs to incorporate additional categories for those leaders who have intersecting backgrounds:

- Muslim Intellectuals: Many are academics, while others have held government positions. They tend to publish research or writings about Islam in Indonesia. They have often written and spoken publicly about the relationship between Islam and politics.
- Muslim Politicians and Government Officials: They can be individual candidates or heads of particular parties (Islamic or “inclusive” parties). They may be elected or appointed.
- Islamic Organization Leaders: They are local or national leaders who run Muslim organizations.
- Religious Scholars: They are known as *ulama* and have strong backgrounds in religious education. They may have studied in Indonesia or abroad.

When Indonesians think of these leaders, various adjectives come to mind: *baikhati* (good-hearted), *pintar* (smart), *berpendidikan* (educated), and *kuat* (strong). There are negative stereotypes as well, especially when there are high-profile cases of corruption or violence. In the media and in everyday discussions, Indonesians have referred to a “special something” that Muslim leaders possess. Although the leaders are human and prone to having the same strengths and weaknesses as anyone else, there is often an implicit recognition that religious leaders have additional characteristics that set them apart. Religious leaders may have a “calling,” learn religious doctrine more quickly and effectively, listen and relate well to others, be well-spoken, or “gifted” in some other manner. What the leader does with such “gifts” can have positive or negative consequences, but what concerns us here is the presence or absence of charisma in Weber's value-free sense. The next sections offer analyses of these four groups of religious leaders and their connections to charisma.

4.1 Muslim Intellectuals

According to Edward Shils, intellectuals are those who search “for the truth, for the principles embedded in events and actions or the establishment of a relationship between the self and the essential...” (1972, p. 6). Muslim intellectuals are in search of truth as it relates to the appropriate relationships between the individual and Islam on the one hand, and Muslims and politics on the other. Their views have influenced how individuals and religious organizations internalize Islam as a religion, as well as how people theoretically, and sometimes pragmatically, deal with politics and the state. They comprise a group of people (mainly academics but some are government officials) who tend to publish research or writings about Islam in Indonesia. Muslim intellectuals often write and speak publicly about the intersection of Islam and politics. They have large audiences even though they may not have “official” government or organizational positions because of the use of mass communications. Depending on the content of their work and the time period, Muslim intellectuals may be living in Indonesia or overseas. Islamic knowledge and authority is thought to have changed in the 1970s with the emergence of Muslim intellectuals.

Robert Hefner claims that education “brought into existence a new generation of Muslim activists and intellectuals who challenged the monopoly of religious authority long enjoyed by the classically trained specialists of Islamic knowledge, the *ulama*” (2000, p. 90). R. William Liddle adds that they “emerged primarily within Islamic organisations, social and educational as well as political, but their membership reach or eligibility was defined in national, Indonesia-wide, terms” – the first “crossover leaders” who were Muslim and national at the same time (1996, p. 167). Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia may or may not have formal education. Their education can be from religious institutions, but mostly are from secular universities (Hefner, 2000, p. 90). There are those who have chosen to be involved in political struggles outside of the realm of academia engaging in protests, rallies, and movements. Some follow the state’s rhetoric, while others outright criticize and rebel against it. Still others confine themselves to the private sphere due to beliefs that religion and religious debates are separate from the public, political sphere. Many have applied their knowledge of Islam beyond the usual scope of Muslim jurisprudence to issue areas as diverse as “changing sex roles, the anomie of urban life, economic hardship, corruption, and political injustice” (Hefner, 2000, p. 90). Muslim intellectuals “work as civil servants, teachers, university lecturers, journalists, and business people” and “most of them grew up in devoutly Islamic families and local communities, often outside Java, becoming modern and national through higher education” (Liddle, 1996, p. 167).

How does one become a Muslim intellectual and are Muslim intellectuals charismatic leaders? To date, there is not much research to adequately answer either of these questions. There are the occasional biographies of individual intellectuals from the traditionalist and modernist schools that point to a combination of psychological, social, and relational factors that create and mold leaders, but there are no systematic frameworks in which to judge whether or not one has actually achieved the status of an intellectual and is in fact a charismatic leader. Furthermore, individuals may feel they have a calling to do the work they do, but because intellectuals are associated with and work within academia, there are more connotations of learned qualities. As such, intellectuals may not be perceived as having extraordinary or exceptional “gifts” that help them understand and lead the world around them. Rather, people may consider them to be intelligent and persuasive, which are qualities that can come from social factors like family, school, and economic status – qualities that may emerge from charismatic education, but not necessarily. In terms of relationships with followers, others may not feel a very strong tie to the intellectual since he or she deals in ideas and less so in immediate material interests. While ideas themselves may be radical and have the potential to change structures and institutions, intellectuals need people and resources to implement those ideas. Unless there is a serious exogenous shock to the system like a national-level crisis, Muslim intellectuals tend to talk and write more than mobilize others or overthrow “the system” (though there is also the intervening factor of government suppression).

This is not to imply that Muslim intellectuals cannot or should not be charismatic leaders since there are cases of dissidents, activist intellectuals, and political critics who have huge followings and are able to mobilize supporters in times of need. Rhetoric can be a powerful force or counterforce given certain environments, but perhaps the role of Muslim intellectuals is more along the lines of providing theoretical and empirical evidence to clarify and argue with the actions of the charismatic leaders who are politicians, government officials, or organization leaders and less along the lines of being the so-called new prophets or warriors themselves. What Weber has to say on this particular point is unclear, so there is room for scholars to explore if and when intellectuals like academics are charismatic leaders.

4.2 Muslim Politicians and Government Officials

In this section, Muslim politicians and government officials are discussed in the context of party politics. Parties usually have one or two main leaders, and such leaders tend to be of the charismatic type. Muslim politicians may be politicians who happen to be Muslim and separate religion from politics to the best of their abilities or they may be representatives of religious communities and currently or formerly members and leaders of Muslim organizations. They can be Muslim intellectuals or *ulama*, too. Much of the data available about Muslim politicians and government officials, however, are either solely concerned with their institutional roles in political parties and the state or is biographical (e.g., family lineage, education, and economic status) and therefore lacking in terms of a cohesive theory concerning charismatic leadership. When authors have discussed leadership more broadly, they often make structural or institutional explanations and attribute leaders’ success or failure to things like the electoral/political, economic, cultural, or international environments at a given time instead of examining the psychological, social, and relational dimensions of charismatic leadership.

Two Indonesian leaders who may be considered to be charismatic are Suharto, who was president from 1967-1998, and Megawati Sukarnoputri (daughter of Sukarno, Indonesia's first president), who was president from 2001-2004. Muslim political leaders like Suharto and Megawati are "unique," but what exactly is it about them that set them apart from the so-called average person? Some have said that they both have special qualities that enabled them to come to power during times of great stress in the country. For example, Suharto arguably came to power in a military coup and even though he was not the highest ranked officer, he garnered enough support to take over as president. Megawati was a familiar face in Indonesia before taking office, but was not expected to be the next in line for the presidency after Abdurrahman Wahid who was the first democratically elected president after Suharto. There were critics of all kinds, including some who said that she was a woman and therefore could not do the job well. And yet, there she was, ready to take power, as Wahid struggled in a negative political climate. Each of their "revolutions" came about differently, though. Suharto's was violent, while Megawati's came about more peacefully. Some critics might argue that they were not necessarily revolutions in the first place. The special qualities found in both leaders have been attributed to their families and upbringing, education, and something "natural" (be it from God or biology). Others have said that they were just in the right place at the right time during a critical juncture in history, as in it was chance or destiny. Perhaps the most applicable part of Weber's theory of charismatic leadership for these two leaders is the notion that charismatic leaders must prove their powers in practice. Otherwise, the leader will lose all authority and power, as Suharto did in 1998 and Megawati in 2004.

Weber's theory can help explain the initial beginnings and developments of charismatic political or religious leadership, but what is missing is an account of charismatic leaders that have intersecting identities with religion and politics. For example, are Muslim politicians acting as politicians with religious interests, politicians with political interests who happen to identify with a particular religion, or do the two identities merge somehow? In the case of Suharto, it was at times uncertain whether he was making use of his political or religious charisma. When he called for change, there were sometimes religious undertones to his political messages. In this way, followers could have been obeying out of fear or respect for political or religious obligations in addition to the more obvious military and police pressures. Megawati, too, may have been seen in the beginning as a "natural" leader in a moment of severe distress, especially during Wahid's controversial term as president, but it is unclear when and why followers supported her during different time periods. She is Muslim and a politician, but which of the identities, if either, is the charismatic part and which of them is generating the loyal following? Could it be that followers think that the political charisma of her father, Sukarno, was passed on to her? Does she have her own charisma? Weber's theories could be expanded in light of such questions to address the possible intersecting identities of leaders, which may also include overlapping identities regarding different forms of religious leadership. Another area to examine is the relational dimension of charismatic leadership in which there is more of a focus on followers and their agency vis-à-vis a charismatic political or religious leader. Analysis must also take up different social contexts that contribute to or limit the rise and rule of a charismatic leader.

4.3 Islamic Organization Leaders

Because there is more data available on the national religious organizations, this section focuses on Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). With each having an estimated 25-30 million members, both organizations have direct and indirect political influence. Both groups have been involved in politics through support for candidates, lobbying, protests, debates concerning public goods and services, and forming or backing political parties. NU and Muhammadiyah eventually decided over time that it was better for their organizations to return to their "original" causes, but they did not totally disengage politically since many policy issues (e.g., education and poverty) require interactions with the state. Though there are a lot of important leaders of NU and Muhammadiyah worthy of discussion, Abdurrahman Wahid from NU (1984-1999) is examined here. Hefner (2000) writes that Wahid descended from a distinguished family of Javanese *ulama*. He was educated in Egypt and Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s. Wahid supposedly grew restless of studying religious law at the conservative Al-Azhar University in Cairo and so turned his attention to Western sociology, democratic theory, German classical music, and French cinema. He returned to Indonesia in the 1970s to briefly teach and preach. He was soon drawn to Jakarta, where he shocked fellow *ulama* by acting as chairperson for the Jakarta film festival twice – a program that was considered risqué and unacceptable. Wahid was eventually elected chairman of NU in 1984, where he modernized the organization over the next six years, "transforming it from a simple vehicle of *ulama* representation into an agent of grassroots development and pluralist democracy" (p. 92).

Though NU is called a representative of the “traditionalist” school, Wahid and fellow members were not conservative in the usual sense that Americans understand the term. Wahid and other individuals in the pro-democracy wing of the Muslim community opposed the creation of an Islamic state and efforts to devalue the citizenship rights of non-Muslims. They preferred to build on local traditions of pluralism and civil participation. Liddle (1996) explains that this was a controversial new course for NU. The group redirected “NU’s activities away from political oppositionism and toward village-level development programs.” Wahid and other leaders claimed that their objective was to “imbue Indonesian Islam with a new social consciousness and to lower the cultural and political barriers separating *santri* from *abangan*” (p. 76).

Wahid attracted the attention of President Suharto, and in 1988 Suharto appointed Wahid to the People’s Consultative Assembly, which at the time was a largely ceremonial body that gave their stamp of approval on the election of the president every five years and outlined the government’s basic policy goals. In the late 1980s, Suharto started to give lucrative business contracts to NU firms. Suharto realized by 1990, though, that Wahid wanted more than just patronage; Wahid wanted social justice and democracy. What followed was a series of attempts by Suharto to discredit Wahid and remove him from leadership. In 1993 and 1994, Suharto directly interfered in NU politics to get rid of Wahid, but the *ulama* chose to re-elect him. In 1995 and 1996, Wahid began to speak openly of an alliance with the leader of the secular nationalist Democratic Party, Megawati Sukarnoputri, which threatened Suharto’s rule. Suharto continued to challenge Wahid, but this time using violence. From 1996 to 1998, there were reports of killings and many victims were said to be supporters of Megawati’s Democratic Party and local preachers and scholars associated with Wahid. Suharto argued that the deaths were caused by the children of communists who wanted revenge on NU for the organization’s involvement in the 1965 killings. It was also alleged that NU supporters participated in the killings for revenge for Muslim scholars who had died.

Given Suharto’s increased use of violence during late 1997 and 1998, Wahid and other NU leaders mobilized a network of activists and members to guard against the violence. For example, youth groups affiliated with NU organized peace patrols for Christian churches and Chinese businesses in East Java. There were repeated acts of provocation, but there were no outbreaks of sectarian violence in that province. In early 1998, amidst intense violence (thousands were injured or died), conspiracy theories, propaganda, national and regional economic crises, and riots, pressure grew for Suharto to leave his position. He stepped down on May 21, 1998 after being pushed to do so by the pro-democracy movement, sections of the military, and Muslim leaders. Abdurrahman Wahid was elected president in October 1999. Although serious social, economic, and political problems remained after he took office, Indonesia was on the road to democratic reform.

Abdurrahman Wahid’s experiences may be seen through the lens of Weber’s theory of charismatic leadership. Some of Weber’s ideas apply, while others do not fit as neatly. We might say that Wahid had some exceptional qualities, but whether or not followers actually believed Wahid had supernatural or superhuman qualities is something that requires research such as surveys and interviews in the future. Making use of Table 1, we can see which categories best apply to Wahid: Situation: Religious, Personality: Prophet, Quality: Ascetic, Attitude of followers: Reverence, Achievement: Revelation, Group Formation: Community of Disciples, and Organization Sects. The situation is religious in that NU is a Muslim organization. Wahid does not perfectly fit the personality type of prophet or quality of being an ascetic, however. Perhaps this typology is more appropriate for religious scholars and not organization leaders. Followers do have a kind of reverence for Wahid, as evidenced by continuous support in the past. Achievement for Wahid is not measured through revelation, but rather through political gains for himself, NU, and Muslims more generally. They may not be considered disciples since “disciple” is a term usually reserved for God and Islam, not a man-made organization. Instead of sects, there are subgroups within NU and affiliate branches.

As for other aspects of Weber’s charismatic leadership, we might say that Wahid is representative of the following:

1. *Supernatural*. According to anecdotes about Wahid’s life and decision to enter politics, some say that he had an “inner calling” and great self-assurance, which enabled him to develop exceptional capacities to lead. These abilities were recognized by others who chose to follow him because of his “charisma,” though this is just one potential explanation for membership. Other considerations such as economic need, political security, political efficacy, religious affiliation, and cultural norms could have contributed to his following, too.

2. *Natural*. Here we do not really see “ecstasy, euphoria, and resentment,” but we do see elements of political passion. Wahid’s exceptional capacity was his magnetic ability to establish a communal bond between leader and followers.
3. *New style*. Wahid had a new political style during Suharto’s regime, which gave direction to his goals, policies, and political symbols. Wahid did not develop distinct political or philosophical doctrines on his own, however. Instead, multiple charismatic leaders cooperated for political change.
4. *Mission*. Wahid felt that it was his duty and that of followers to devote their lives to fulfilling a new program in the political and social spheres of life.
7. *Revolution*. Wahid emerged as a leader in a time of political crisis. He was part of an “emotional revolution” and expressed the resentment of the disprivileged masses (Muslims, Christians, Chinese, etc. under the oppressive Suharto regime).
9. *Routinization*. Routinization is already present since NU is an established organization with rules and a bureaucracy with administrative staff and economic support from a variety of sources. Routinization was also present after Wahid took office. In some respects he became a figurehead of a primarily bureaucratic and interest-oriented regime. Wahid eventually had to step down from power on corruption charges and an atmosphere of political instability. Perhaps we can infer from this situation that his charisma did not last, as Weber predicted for charismatic leaders’ rule. As Weber argued, problems of routinization and succession have their ways of dismantling the power of charismatic leaders even though they start out needed and wanted by others.

Wahid led despite opposition from within his organization. Liddle states, “Among traditionalists, even NU traditionalists, Abdurrahman Wahid is a unique figure who often leads where his people do not want to go. He bubbles over with unconventional ideas, many of which have to do with concern for the substance rather than the form of religion and with tolerance toward non-Muslims. Many of his constituents respond with incomprehension if not hostility” (1996, p. 165). Nonetheless, Wahid is “an important force for cultural change, bringing new ideas to village Muslims and legitimating those ideas through the traditional authority he holds by virtue of his ancestry and his effectiveness as a political leader” (p. 166) – and we might add, his charisma.

4.4 Muslim Scholars

Like Islamic organization leaders, religious scholars – the *ulama* – fit into Weber’s conceptions of charismatic leadership, but with some qualifications. *Ulama* are teachers and mediators for religious services and guidance. They have authority in their status as interpreters of Islamic values and principles. Unlike Christianity, Islam does not have a highly centralized system of leadership or bureaucracy. There are councils of *ulama* in Indonesia, but followers may choose whom to believe and support. *Ulama* are typically graduates of classical Muslim schools and spent their youth in *pesantren* (Muslim schools). They then go on to lead their own *pesantren*. *Ulamahelp* with *zakat* collection (similar to tithing and charity) and assist their followers with the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). Unlike Muslim intellectuals, *ulama* tend to have much more localized authority and followers. Support for traditional *ulama* is usually concentrated in particular geographic areas or regions (Liddle, 1996, p. 167). *Ulama* are charged with leading and caring for the *ummat* (“community of the faithful”). *Ulamaget* involved with national politics when there are religiously- or morally-defined issues at stake since the *ummat* can extend from the local level to the larger Muslim community as a whole. Although the *ulama* essentially have some political authority as it relates to religious authority, not all *ulama* are charismatic leaders of the revolutionary type. They instead are thought to possess *ikhlas*, meaning “religious piety” or “devotion to a higher cause without any consideration of self-interest.” It is a Qur’anic word and one of the titles of a section in the Qur’an: “Ikhlas” (Devotion to God) (Nakamura, 1977, p. 14). Not everyone is able or wants to have *ikhlas*, making the *ulama* all the more unique.

Again making use of Table 1, we can see which categories apply to Muslim scholars: Situation: Religious, Personality: Prophet, Quality: Ascetic, Attitude of followers: Reverence, Achievement: Revelation, Group Formation: Community of Disciples, and Organization: Sects. *Ulama* are understood not to be prophets (though there may be sects that disagree) and their achievements are not necessarily in the realm of revelation. The other categories seem to be more applicable, though. *Ulama* generally have an inner calling to do the work they do and have exceptional capacities to establish bonds with followers. Their abilities to lead may come from a “unique gift of grace” or were developed over time. Here a combination of psychological, social, and relational factors could be at work.

Recall that for Weber, charisma changes into a quality that is “either (a) transferable or (b) personally acquirable or (c) attached to the incumbent of an office or to an institutional structure regardless of the persons involved,” and so religious scholars could potentially attain charisma through charismatic education, which in this context would be religious schooling. In Schweitzer’s framework, the following may also help clarify the relationship between the *ulama* and charismatic leadership:

1. *Supernatural*. Followers may recognize the *ulama*s supernatural, but not above God. Followers may feel a sense of duty to follow the *ulamab*because of their special abilities and knowledge of Islam.
2. *Natural*. Further research is needed to examine the nature of the *ulama*’s “exceptional capacities” and “magnetic abilities.” Do followers follow because of ecstasy, euphoria, resentment, political passion, or some other reason? There is a communal bond between religious scholars and followers, but how is it established? Do followers believe *ulamato* have natural abilities that they do not possess themselves or is trust based on something else?
4. *Mission*. For the *ulama*, their mission comes from religious doctrine. It is the duty of these leaders and followers to devote their lives to fulfilling the program as set out in the Qur’an in the social spheres of life, if not the political as well. The “how” in terms of implementation or method to achieve the mission(s) is a matter of debate, however.
7. *Revolution*. Revolution here is probably not in the context of religious upheaval, but there were historical changes from Hinduism and Buddhism to Islam in Indonesia long ago. Perhaps revolution in the present context can refer to the minority of *ulama* who call for an Islamic state, a “revolution” not of Islam but of the political state.

The *ulamam* may be catalysts for change if we think of local contexts more so than national ones. They regularly mobilize and guide local communities for moral, social, and economic development with their charismatic leadership, but their charisma has a different face than what Weber might have initially had in mind.

5. Conclusion

As the preceding sections suggest, there are several areas in which future research is needed with regard to charisma and Muslim leaders in Indonesia. First, Weber’s overall theory of charismatic leadership needs to be expanded to include details about how to precisely identify charismatic leaders and make distinctions between leaders. In addition, we need an improved account of the individual or historical conditions and cultural attitudes that give rise to and influence charismatic leadership. Also, Weber had in mind prophets when he discussed charismatic leaders, but prophets are not the only type of religious leader as the case of Indonesia shows. Any theory of charismatic leadership needs to include variation with regard to different kinds of religious leaders and leaders with intersecting identities since we may disagree on what psychological, social, or relational factors create or contribute to charisma, especially because what one person assumes to be charisma may not be interpreted or experienced as such by another individual. For example, a Muslim intellectual like Nurcholish Madjid may not be considered charismatic because he was not a politician or head of an organization and some local *ulama* may be seen as charismatic even though they are not “radical revolutionaries.”

Second, since charismatic leadership varies among leaders of different types – Muslim intellectuals, politicians, government officials, organization leaders, and scholars – how do we mediate amongst competing kinds of charisma? In debates between majorities and minorities within a particular organization, between organizations, with the state, etc., how do followers with multiple attachments and loyalties decide what to do? Does one form of charismatic leadership win out in certain instances and not in others? For instance, are Muslims more or less likely to follow a charismatic religious scholar or a charismatic religious intellectual? In a similar vein, what happens when charismatic religious leaders compete with non-charismatic political leaders, but the latter have more authority and power? This is related to internal or external conflicts regarding values (e.g., religion) and immediate needs (e.g., security). Followers of the charismatic leader may just wait for political opportunity structures to open up or directly challenge the non-charismatic authority figure despite risks and consequences. We have yet to develop a robust theory or model that delineates the thresholds and contexts for following a charismatic leader. Perhaps this is where institutional and structural accounts can help us. The phenomenon of charismatic leadership has been shown to exist in diverse cultural, political, economic, and religious settings. Understanding the effects of prominent historical figures on political behavior and outcomes is more difficult than merely observing it, though.

This suggests that we need to think more carefully about the theoretical and empirical applications and limitations of the concept itself before measuring its impact. This article has attempted to bring together Weber's concept of charisma and data from Indonesia in order to shed some light on charismatic leadership and more specifically on who Muslim leaders are and what they do. Weber's theories help us make some sense of Indonesia's experiences with "extraordinary" leaders, but needs to be examined and tested further if we are to make sensible and coherent arguments and even predictions about leaders, their groups, and religiopolitical participation.

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