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Author(s)
Corresponding Author
Asrinaldi
0000-0002-4809-6676
masrinaldi@soc.unand.ac.id
Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia

Between Empowerment and Cooptation: The Role of Mass Organizations in Indonesia's Democratic Consolidation

Asrinaldi

Abstract: The political role of mass organizations (Ormas) in Indonesia has evolved significantly following the transition from the New Order to Reformasi democracy. This study examines how Ormas navigate their roles as interest groups and pressure groups and how these roles affect democratic consolidation. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyzes secondary data from 1998–2025, comprising academic publications, government documents, and national media reports. Data were examined through qualitative thematic analysis and interpretive cross-source comparison, with preliminary findings validated through an expert-focused group discussion. The findings show that Ormas do not function as fixed types of interest or pressure groups. Rather, they shift between interest representation and political pressure as different modes of political action, depending on political access, issue salience, perceived threats to organizational interests, and organizational survival. While these strategies can strengthen civic participation and democratic representation, state accommodation and co-optation may undermine organizational autonomy and transform Ormas into instruments of political mobilization. The study argues that democratic consequences therefore depend on the interaction between organizational autonomy and state–civil society relations. Strengthening the democratic role of Ormas requires transparent regulation, greater financial and organizational autonomy, and stronger civic and political education to enable them to function as independent channels of representation and counterbalances to political power.

Keywords: Mass organizations; Public participation; political transformation; civil society; democracy

About the Author(s)

Asrinaldi is a lecturer at the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Andalas. His areas of expertise include Democracy and Local Politics, with several of his works published in reputable international journals as well as accredited Indonesian journals (Sinta). In addition to scholarly publications, Asrinaldi also contributes popular articles and opinion pieces to national and local media outlets.

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I. Introduction

In a democratic system, mass organizations (Ormas) constitute an essential pillar in strengthening citizen participation, supporting social services, and serving as a bridge between the state and society (Prayudi, 2022; Rusfiana & Kurniasih, 2024; Azhar et al., 2026). Ideally, the role of Ormas as part of civil society should remain independent, critical, and constructive toward political processes and public policy. According to data from the Ministry of Home Affairs as of March 5, 2024, there are 546,992 registered Ormas in Indonesia, of which 1,530 hold a Certificate of Registration and 553,162 are legally incorporated.

Among the largest and most influential Ormas are Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), particularly in the religious sphere. Muhammadiyah, for instance, has made substantial contributions to education and health services in Indonesia. Although not a political organization, Muhammadiyah has never been entirely apolitical (Syaifullah, 2022). Similarly, Nahdlatul Ulama plays a crucial role in religious life while simultaneously maintaining its broader social mission (Albani, 2021). Beyond these two, many other Ormas in Indonesia are committed to contributing to nation-building.

In the post-Reformasi context, however, political dynamics have driven the transformation of certain Ormas from primarily social and religious institutions into active political actors. This shift has become inevitable within Indonesia's increasingly democratic political system, characterized by elite polarization. Political elites often seek to build support from various groups, including Ormas with large grassroots bases, by cultivating patronage relations (Setiawan & Tomsa, 2023; Supriatma, 2025). Such dynamics were evident during the 1999 election, when newly established parties such as the National Mandate Party (PAN) and the National Awakening Party (PKB), though not formally affiliated, gained substantial support from Muhammadiyah and NU constituencies (Vebrianto, 2021; Hasyim, 2022).

At the same time, certain Ormas also began to express political positions in opposition to government policies. The Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), for instance, initially gained prominence through its community empowerment and humanitarian activities, particularly in disaster relief efforts. Its contributions included assisting victims of the 2004 Aceh earthquake and tsunami, providing relief in the 2018 Palu earthquake and tsunami, and constructing water channels for displaced communities after the 2019 Ambon earthquake (Hafansyah & Syahuri, 2023).

This humanitarian orientation was closely tied to FPI's founding mission of "enjoining good and forbidding evil," which, in its view, could only be realized through the implementation of Islamic law. As a consequence, FPI's activities extended beyond humanitarian engagement to direct involvement in ethno-religious conflicts during the early Reformasi period (Abiddin, et al., 2022; Kamil, 2024). The Ambon conflict of 1999 exemplifies this trajectory, as FPI mobilized on the basis of religious sentiments in the absence of effective state mediation (Rizaldy, 2025).

Such developments heightened government concerns over threats to national unity, as Indonesia was founded upon religious pluralism rather than a singular religious identity. FPI's persistent advocacy for the institutionalization of Islamic law significantly shaped national politics. The transformation of certain Ormas into political forces reflects not only the freedoms enabled by democracy after the fall of the New Order but also the gaps left by political parties that have failed to effectively perform civic education functions. Consequently, this has contributed to low levels of external political efficacy among citizens, who often perceive government responses to issues of justice, welfare, and discrimination as inadequate. Political efficacy remains a crucial factor in fostering political participation in democratic societies (Prasetiyo et al., 2025).

This phenomenon can be observed in the emergence of Ormas that not only articulate the interests of society but also explicitly position themselves as political actors either exerting pressure on or affiliating with certain political parties. The primary objective is to influence government policies. In practice, however, such objectives are not always pursued in the interest of justice; rather, they often serve as a means to acquire political power. Establishing Ormas has become an effective strategy for mobilizing political support within society (Asrinaldi, 2014). In some cases, political elites manipulate political

values in the process of mobilization, leading to haphazard or distorted political support. Such implications stem from low political awareness among citizens, reflecting the absence of political value internalization within society (Prasetiyo et al., 2025).

The lack of political awareness has negatively impacted the transformation of Ormas, diverting them from their founding purposes. The political pragmatism of Ormas elites has undermined their democratic function as catalysts for civic engagement. Instead, many Ormas have become obstacles to democratization. Conflicts between Ormas and local communities, or even among Ormas themselves, illustrate how these organizations have undergone significant transformation in the democratic process. During the New Order era, very few Ormas engaged directly in politics, as most were focused on community empowerment. The corporatist state policies of the New Order were a decisive factor in shaping Ormas as political forces, though their role in social and political activities largely served to reinforce state policies (Araf, 2022).

Within the framework of pluralist political theory, as articulated by Heywood & Chin, democracy flourishes when political power is dispersed across various institutional arrangements within the political system (Heywood & Chin, 2023). The state no longer dominates political processes but instead provides space for diverse societal groups. Political pluralism is expressed through mechanisms of representation, participation, and deliberation (Escobar, 2017). While these activities are often considered foundational to pluralism, in practice their effectiveness depends on the political awareness of individuals and groups. Frequently, Ormas, given their organizational capacity, are better positioned than individuals to take advantage of these opportunities.

In a democratic system, democratic actors interact extensively, particularly when they are concerned with the same issues. The involvement of actors from various backgrounds illustrates the diversity of interests that are accommodated in the same system. The aim is to ensure that the democratic system operates in accordance with its own objectives and interests. For example, interest groups that fight for their aspirations in a democratic system convey their aspirations through a formal mechanism with a representative system.

However, for pressure groups, in addition to formal channels, they also go through informal channels with pressure exerted, including through demonstrations that demand changes to the existing system when it does not serve their interests. As long as the political system accommodates this reality, democracy can be implemented properly. In this context, democratic consolidation can proceed in ways that accommodate the political interests being pursued.

In Indonesia, Ormas can generally be categorized based on their functions within the political system, either as interest groups or as pressure groups. Interest groups are a vital element of modern democracy, enabling diverse societal aspirations to be channeled into the political process. This aligns with the principle that political power is not concentrated solely within government but is distributed across society in various institutionalized forms. One of the most prominent manifestations of this principle is the role of Ormas, or civil society organizations. Such distribution of power serves to balance political forces, thereby enabling democracy to function. However, Ormas often also act as pressure groups seeking to influence government policies (Suryadi et al., 2025; CNN Indonesia, 2021).

Usually, the main difference between interest groups and pressure groups lies in the strategies they use to achieve their objectives. Interest groups tend to pursue their objectives through more formal and less confrontational means. Meanwhile, in addition to using formal strategies, pressure groups tend to also use less conventional strategies, such as rallies that mobilize large crowds, through lobbying and even using more confrontational efforts to shape public opinion in support of their objectives. However, both interest groups and pressure groups usually exchange strategies with each other, as long as the goals they want to achieve can be achieved. As a result, in practice, it is often difficult to distinguish between interest groups and pressure groups based on their strategies.

In a democratic political system, competition among political elites for power occurs openly through elections. Political party elites, in particular, compete to secure voter support. When

ruling elites perceive their power to be threatened, they often seek to co-opt opposing groups into their governing coalition. Co-optation is attractive for ruling elites as it requires fewer resources, since collaboration is framed as mutually beneficial. However, the changes demanded by opposition elites through such arrangements are rarely realized, leaving them dissatisfied and politically marginalized. Ultimately, ruling elites expend minimal political energy and resources while consolidating their own agendas, rendering opposition elites increasingly irrelevant (Holdo, 2019, p. 444; Heimann et al., 2025).

Co-optation of Ormas takes shape not only through patronage networks but also through partnerships based on selective compensation. Yet, in practice, such partnerships rarely produce mutual benefits. Instead, ruling political elites often gain more than Ormas elites in opposition. In many Indonesian cases, governments have employed Ormas as partners to counter political attacks in the public sphere. By mobilizing certain Ormas, governments secure their political interests, presenting these groups as allies while, in reality, instrumentalizing them as defensive forces against public or opposition criticism.

Over time, Ormas have transformed into political forces due to the widening democratic space provided by the state. Their ability to mobilize resources, particularly large numbers of followers, has facilitated this transformation. Within the context of liberal democracy, which emphasizes majority rule in decision-making, Ormas often confront the government, particularly in policy-making arenas. For instance, some Ormas have resorted to violence against state security forces in land disputes involving local communities and private companies that employ Ormas as security providers. The mobilization of mass support serves as a bargaining tool in negotiations with government institutions or rival groups, frequently culminating in conflict. Ormas followers are known for their high degree of loyalty, which enables their leaders to mobilize them effectively in pursuit of organizational or elite interests (Araf, 2022).

Given their mass-based character and the solid loyalty of their members, Ormas are often exploited for political purposes. Frequently, Ormas also maintain close ties with particular political parties, creating patterns of mutual dependency for instance, Muhammadiyah with the National Mandate Party (PAN) (Vebrianto, 2021). Similarly, the United Indonesian People's Movement (GRIB) Jaya has often been associated with the Gerindra Party, led by Prabowo Subianto (Wilson, 2018). According to Wilson, the relationship between GRIB Jaya's chairman, Hercules, and Prabowo Subianto dates back to military operations in East Timor now Timor Leste. This proximity to President Prabowo Subianto has enabled GRIB Jaya to act freely in pursuing its interests, at times through actions that deviate from democratic norms. Notable incidents include the seizure of land belonging to the Meteorology, Climatology, and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) in Pondok Aren, South Tangerang, which was leased to traders, as well as violent clashes with other Ormas such as Pemuda Pancasila in Blora, Tasikmalaya, and Bandung (Tempo, 2025). These cases illustrate that post–New Order democracy has been accompanied by the rise of Ormas that have transformed their social influence into political power, sometimes strengthening, but also threatening, democratic life.

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The existence of Ormas in a democratic state is inevitable, as they serve as catalysts of democracy. Although they vary in form and interests, their overarching purpose is largely similar: to raise public awareness of civic existence in broader society. Their role is to foster independence in fulfilling their legally recognized functions. Accordingly, Ormas are expected to operate autonomously, free from excessive dependence on state institutions, in order to perform their roles effectively.

According to Law No. 16 of 2017, an Ormas is defined as an "organization established and formed voluntarily by members of society on the basis of shared aspirations, desires, needs, interests, activities, and goals, in order to participate in development toward the achievement of the objectives of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, founded upon Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution." This legal emphasis on state objectives positions the state as the central political authority with the power to regulate Ormas. It is therefore unsurprising that post-Reformasi Ormas whose goals diverge from the state's prescribed purposes have faced government sanctions. Such was the case with Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which were disbanded after the government determined that their activities violated the Ormas Law. As the sovereign authority, the state possesses legitimate coercive power within its territory and may exercise it when necessary to safeguard national objectives from being subverted by societal organizations or groups. The dissolution of HTI and FPI thus exemplifies the government's use of its constitutional authority (Voice of Indonesia, 2021).

The core challenge, however, lies in the fact that the government is not always a neutral institution. As it is composed of elected political elites, who themselves are nominated by political parties with vested interests, the government often acts under the guise of the public interest while pursuing partisan agendas. This ambivalence is evident in the state's relationship with Ormas: on one hand, certain groups are preserved or co-opted for the short-term interests of ruling elites, particularly to maintain political stability; on the other, the government finds it difficult to discipline Ormas, whose leaders are closely aligned with those in power (The Jakarta Post, 2025).

During the New Order, however, issues of ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (SARA) were tightly controlled and prohibited from being exploited in society. By contrast, in the Reformasi era, elite polarization and competing political interests have fostered pragmatism, with elites leveraging Ormas as strategic tools to defend and advance their positions, often by pitting one organization against another. This trend has become more pronounced in the post–New Order period under the pretext of democratic freedom, as the government granted Ormas significant space to grow and operate. Yet, this freedom has also been frequently misinterpreted by Ormas, leading them away from their founding purposes and in violation of the Ormas Law. Consequently, the government has often resorted to firm measures against such organizations. Nevertheless, public criticism persists regarding the state's ambivalent stance, particularly when it co-opts Ormas that align with the ruling elite's interests.

In political practice, CSOs have undergone a significant transformation in their roles within the post-New Order political process. One consequence of this transformation has been the development of survival strategies in response to changes in the political system and the policy environment shaped by the government. In many of the activities they undertake, CSOs simultaneously perform the functions of both interest groups and pressure groups.

Therefore, the political role of Ormas is not determined by a fixed organizational identity as either interest groups or pressure groups. Rather, Ormas strategically shift between interest representation and political pressure in response to issue salience, political access, perceived threats, and organizational survival. These strategic shifts are conditioned by state responses, particularly co-optation and repression, which ultimately determine whether Ormas contribute to or undermine democratic consolidation.

The exercise of these two functions varies according to the issues pursued by CSOs and the extent to which such issues affect the sustainability of their social and political activities and their broader community interests. In practice, an interest group may adopt the strategies of a pressure group when the objectives it seeks to advance fail to receive adequate attention from policymakers. Thus, the distinction between interest groups and pressure groups should not necessarily be understood as a distinction between two separate types of organizations, but rather as a distinction between different modes of political action adopted in response to particular policy circumstances.

Conceptually, an interest group, according to Anoine (2025), refers to a group of individuals who organize around shared interests in order to influence the formulation and implementation

of public policy. Such groups are united by a common perspective and a shared objective concerning how public policies should be shaped to reflect and accommodate their interests. From this perspective, interest-group activity primarily involves efforts to influence policymakers through established and conventional channels of political representation and policy engagement.

Interest groups do not necessarily have to transform their organizational identity when they intensify their strategies in response to the failure of conventional mechanisms for influencing public policy. Rather, they may shift from relatively accommodative forms of interest representation toward more assertive forms of political pressure. The strategies employed by pressure groups are generally contingent upon the responses of policymakers and may include lobbying, consultation, dialogue, petitioning, public mobilization, and, in more confrontational circumstances, other forms of contentious political action.

CSOs are therefore organizational actors capable of performing both interest-representation and pressure-group functions. Their status as interest groups is rooted primarily in the interests and objectives they represent, whereas their function as pressure groups is reflected more directly in the strategies and instruments they employ to influence public decisions. The intensity with which these functions are exercised may vary according to the nature of the issue, the degree of political access available to the organization, the perceived level of threat to its interests, and the need to preserve organizational survival. This perspective helps explain why CSOs in Indonesia may simultaneously perform the roles of interest groups and pressure groups, shifting between these modes of political engagement in response to changing political and policy environments.

The simultaneous dynamics of co-optation and repression of Ormas raise a crucial question: does the political transformation of Ormas strengthen or weaken Indonesian democracy? Furthermore, how should the government position itself toward Ormas that act not only as interest groups but also as pressure groups in their attempts to shape a more substantive democracy?. This study challenges the tendency to treat interest groups and pressure groups as mutually exclusive organizational categories. In the Indonesian context, Ormas may occupy both positions simultaneously or shift between them depending on political and policy circumstances.

A key contribution of this study is its recognition that CSOs can perform both interest-group and pressure-group roles. The cases discussed in the next section show how interest groups may adopt pressure-group strategies when their usual approaches prove ineffective. This explanation deepens our understanding of CSOs in Indonesia, which may be formed to pursue specific interests, including both public and political interests.

II. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach based on secondary data to examine the changing roles, strategies, and political engagement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Indonesia during 1998–2025. Data were collected from academic publications, government documents, and national online media reports. Sources were purposively selected based on relevance to the research questions, substantive information, and credibility. The final corpus comprised 60 principal sources, consisting of 30 academic publications and 30 media reports, while government documents were used as supplementary sources to clarify policy and institutional contexts. Media credibility was assessed through source identification, relevance, and cross-source comparison, with duplicate and insufficiently relevant materials excluded.

Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis and interpretive cross-source comparison. Coding combined deductive categories derived from the research questions and theoretical framework with inductive themes emerging from the data. Major themes included CSO interests, organizational roles, political strategies, advocacy practices, and interactions with government. Contradictory evidence was retained and critically compared to identify differences, tensions, and changes across sources and periods. The study employed dialectical engagement as an author-defined interpretive process involving iterative movement between empirical evidence, theoretical perspectives, and contextual analysis. This approach helped explain divergent findings and unexpected cases, including the overlapping roles

of CSOs as interest groups and pressure groups, beyond merely describing observed patterns.

To strengthen analytical credibility, the preliminary findings were discussed in a single 90-minute focus group discussion (FGD) involving three purposively selected experts: a branch-level executive of a socio-religious organization with 15 years of experience, a political science lecturer specializing in political and social movements with five years of academic experience, and a former Legal Aid Institute activist with five years of advocacy experience. Their feedback was compared with documentary evidence and used to refine interpretations and identify potential analytical blind spots. The FGD served as expert-informed analytical validation rather than statistical reliability testing. The study acknowledges limitations arising from reliance on secondary data, potential source biases, purposive source selection, and the involvement of only three experts. Accordingly, its findings support analytical rather than statistical generalization.

III. Results and Discussions

A. From Controlled Organizations to Political Actors: Democratic Opening after Reformasi

The transformation of mass organizations (Ormas) into political forces has been driven by the development of democracy, which has opened spaces for interaction among political actors within the political system. In a closed political system, the role of Ormas was limited to supporting government programs, particularly in empowering communities in economic, social, and cultural spheres. These activities were closely monitored to prevent them from entering the political domain, which was strictly prohibited by the government. Political activities were the exclusive domain of pro-government political parties, which tended to operate on ideological and doctrinal bases. Under such a system, Ormas rarely engaged in political matters, as state oversight of all social organizations was the norm; the state possessed power far exceeding that of any organization within its jurisdiction. As Chaudhry (2022, p. 550) notes, "Administrative crackdown is a nonviolent strategy which entails enacting legal restrictions to create barriers to entry, funding, and advocacy by NGOs."

This dynamic was evident during the New Order period in Indonesia. Ormas were directed toward activities related to economic empowerment, particularly in rural areas. The floating mass policy implemented by the New Order government further depoliticized society, discouraging public interest in political engagement (Lay, 2017). Consequently, not only were Ormas restricted from political activities, but ordinary citizens also became disinterested in politics, perceiving it as irrelevant compared to meeting economic needs. The regime thus prioritized economic development over political participation, allowing citizens to engage in politics only once every five years through elections. Even then, electoral choices were engineered to legitimize the dominance of Golkar and secure President Suharto's rule from 1966 to 1998 (Hendardi, 2020).

During this period, Ormas were granted permits solely for social, economic, and community-based activities, while involvement in politics or efforts to mobilize citizens for political engagement were strictly forbidden. Many Ormas dared to engage in political activities, let alone encourage citizens to participate in politics. Unintentionally, the New Order's restrictions also functioned as a strategy of mass de-ideologization, which left citizens with little understanding of politics within a genuine democratic practice. A serious implication of this condition, one that confronted the post-Reformasi government, was the difficult task of restoring political consciousness among citizens, which had eroded as a result of decades of state policies designed to distance society from politics.

However, the post–New Order transition created greater opportunities for Ormas to operate openly. Their pursuit of political interests, previously less visible, has become increasingly apparent. Ormas also tend to expand their membership within communities in order to achieve their objectives. Community involvement in these mass organizations strengthens their bargaining power vis-à-vis the government when advocating for particular issues. This is particularly true when these issues are raised during election campaigns. Ormas leaders are well aware of their strategic position so that Ormas that initially advocate for community interests may consequently adopt

pressure-group strategies. Moreover, if the masses owned by these Ormas' are large so that they can be used for the benefit of votes for certain political parties.

B. Ormas as Interest Groups: Representation through Institutional and Conventional Channels

The Reformasi era, following the fall of the New Order regime in 1998, marked the proliferation of civil society organizations (Ormas) in Indonesia. Many Ormas that had previously focused solely on social and community-based activities began to engage in political initiatives as a strategy to strengthen their bargaining position vis-à-vis the state. This development was particularly evident during the early stages of Reformasi, even though the government continued to impose restrictions on Ormas activities whenever these were perceived to conflict with regime interests (Setiawan & Tomsa, 2023). Initially, Ormas functioned as institutions of empowerment and philanthropy, but as political contestation permeated all segments of public life, their activities inevitably became politicized. Elites, in turn, capitalized on democratic freedoms to pursue political interests. Within the framework of a liberal political system, public support has become a crucial source of legitimacy, even though citizens are not formally involved in policymaking. Hence, Ormas have increasingly recognized the importance of cultivating public support, particularly in relation to government-led agendas.

The political transformation of Ormas has primarily served to strengthen their functions and reposition them in relation to the state, especially in influencing policy outcomes. While not all Ormas explicitly focus on politics, few are entirely apolitical. Muhammadiyah, for example, is primarily known for its social and religious activities. Yet, for Muhammadiyah, politics is considered a "by-product" of its broader mission of amar ma'ruf nahi munkar. Historically, many Muhammadiyah leaders have also been active in political parties and government institutions, ensuring that Muhammadiyah values indirectly influence political and administrative practices.

Indeed, in some cases, the government has a strong role in controlling these CSOs through intervention with regulations made so that they not only change the form of CSOs, but also their functions. For example, related to the emergence of Law No. 16 of 2017 which had a major impact on the form of CSOs and changed how their strategy in achieving their goals. Although, many criticisms made against this law are considered not to reflect democracy in the political system, but the government is unmoved because of its importance to the desired political stability.

The expansion of democracy after the New Order has had significant implications for the development of Ormas. The social capital embodied in their community-oriented values has attracted citizens to join, thereby strengthening their organizational base (Araf, 2022). For Ormas, such membership growth enhances their ability to pursue institutional goals, particularly within the competitive landscape of liberal democracy, where mass mobilization is essential. This is why political parties often establish affiliated organizations or "party wings" to recruit and mobilize grassroots supporters, especially during elections (Perdana, 2015). Major political parties in Indonesia exemplify this practice: Golkar is linked to Kosgoro, Soksi, and the Golkar Women's Group (KPG); PDI-P has Baitul Muslimin Indonesia (Bamusi), which targets religious communities; Gerindra maintains Gerakan Muslimin Indonesia Raya (Gemira); and the Democratic Party is associated with Majelis Dzikir SBY. These auxiliary bodies aim to consolidate mass support and increase electoral outcomes.

Beyond forming party wings, political parties also seek alliances with independent Ormas that have substantial followings and strong community engagement. While some Ormas deliberately distance themselves from formal political collaboration in order to preserve organizational autonomy, others willingly approach political parties, particularly ruling ones, to gain access to state resources. The transformation of Ormas into political institutions is not unprecedented in Indonesian politics. The establishment of the National Democratic Party (Nasdem) in 2011, which originated from the Ormas Nasional Demokrat, illustrates this trajectory. Similarly, the Indonesian Labor Party emerged in 2021 from the consolidation of ten labor-based Ormas, highlighting how grassroots mobilization serves as a precursor to party formation. These cases demonstrate that the nexus between Ormas and political parties is both strategic and inevitable.

Ormas also serve as catalysts for democratic participation by providing their members with opportunities to organize, deliberate, and advocate for shared objectives. Such experiences enhance civic competencies and increase members' internal political efficacy (Siswanto, 2020). For large Ormas with broad constituencies, political advocacy, even against the government, can be pursued with confidence. Conversely, smaller Ormas often avoid direct confrontation and instead prioritize community development projects, frequently seeking cooperation with the state. However, these cooperative arrangements often lead to co-optation by political elites, particularly given the financial dependency of many Ormas.

Cooptation strategies are also actively pursued by governments seeking Ormas' support in policy implementation. Ormas elites are often integrated into state programs, rewarded with contracts, land concessions, or other benefits (Bahar et al., 2025; Muhiddin & Syamsidah, 2025). For instance, under President Joko Widodo, large Islamic organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah were offered opportunities to manage mining concessions. Such arrangements, while beneficial in material terms, tend to weaken the critical oversight role of Ormas vis-à-vis the government, as many leaders become complicit in patronage networks. Historically, similar patterns characterized the New Order, where Ormas elites (such as the "jawara" of Banten) served as loyal intermediaries for regime consolidation (Wilson, 2018). This illustrates a recurring pattern of hierarchical patronage that links state elites, Ormas elites, and grassroots members.

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The case of Pemuda Pancasila (PP) further highlights the enduring relationship between Ormas and political power. Founded in 1959 under the auspices of the Army through the Indonesian Independence Supporters' Association (IPKI), PP was established to counter the Communist Party's youth wing and defend the state ideology of Pancasila (Tempo, 2022). While PP remains a powerful organization today, it is often associated with practices of vigilantism and criminality. Nevertheless, it exemplifies how Ormas have historically functioned as instruments of political control. Successive governments have maintained close ties with selected Ormas, such as PP during the New Order, FKPPI under President Yudhoyono, and GRIB Jaya under President Prabowo Subianto, revealing how Ormas' proximity to power is frequently shaped by leaders' personal networks and political affiliations (Suripto, 2024).

Prominent Islamic Ormas such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have historically served as counterweights to government policy, especially under the New Order. Yet, their collaboration with the regime also reflected mutual instrumentalization: the state relied on them to consolidate legitimacy, while they benefited from access to resources and state patronage. Similar co-optation strategies continue in the Reformasi era, as seen in government-Ormas alignments under Prabowo's presidency.

The relationship between Ormas and the state is not solely based on cooperation, however. At times, Ormas have been perceived as threats to governance and public order. In such cases, the state has resorted to coercive measures, including outright dissolution. Notable examples include the government's banning of Jamaah Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) in 2004, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in 2007, Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) in 2014, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) in 2017, and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) in 2020 (Prastiwi, 2021). These actions were legitimized under Law No. 17/2013 on Ormas, later revised by Law No. 16/2017, which authorizes dissolution when an Ormas' objectives or practices are deemed inconsistent with the foundational principles of the Indonesian state: the 1945 Constitution, Pancasila, and the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI).

This practice underscores the government's intent to regulate and, when necessary, suppress civil society organizations in the name of sovereignty and national stability (Araf, 2022). Yet,

this raises critical questions regarding democratic governance: to what extent are such measures genuinely aimed at protecting state integrity, and to what extent do they serve the interests of ruling elites seeking to maintain power? Critics argue that the dissolution of Ormas reflects less a defense of democratic values than an attempt by political elites to neutralize opposition and entrench their authority.

On the other hand, the dissolution of mass organizations carried out by the government certainly received sharp criticism from civil society. They consider what the government is doing not in line with the freedoms granted by the constitution. The government's firm stance is not accompanied by the appreciation of freedom of association and assembly as contained in Article 28 of the 1945 Constitution. In fact, what can be seen is the concern of the ruling elite about the power threatened by the existence of these dissolved mass organizations.

The actions of these Ormas are shaped by the availability of legally established channels through which they can pursue their organizational interests. When political access remains available and organizations consider institutional channels effective, Ormas may choose these channels even when their interests conflict with those of the ruling elite.

For example, the courage of HTI and FPI to openly oppose the government related to religious issues, so they responded in a harsher way. HTI and FPI abandoned conventional channels that were considered no longer effective so that they turned into a political force that repressed government policies. This reality is what disturbs the government so that decisive action to dissolve HTI and FPI is a choice that must be taken by the government.

C. From Interest Representation to Political Pressure

The presence of civil society organizations (Ormas) has significantly contributed to the advancement of democracy in Indonesia. As interest groups, Ormas perform crucial functions within society. Yet, the temptation for Ormas to engage in direct political activity remains strong, given their resources and societal relevance. As long as Ormas can clearly demarcate their role from that of political parties, democratic practices are likely to develop in a healthy manner. Indeed, Ormas often occupy spaces neglected by political parties, while governments, constrained by limited resources, are likewise unable to fill these gaps. However, when Ormas deviate from their primary role in social empowerment and community development, the quality of democratic practice tends to deteriorate.

Civil society organizations (CSOs), including organisasi kemasyarakatan (Ormas), have played an important role in Indonesia's democratic development by representing societal interests, mobilizing collective action, providing social services, and holding public authorities accountable. Their contribution, however, cannot be assessed solely by whether they remain separate from political parties or confine themselves to social empowerment and community development. Rather, it depends on how they engage with political power and how their engagement affects democratic accountability and the quality of governance.

The political involvement of Ormas should therefore not be regarded as inherently detrimental to democracy. The critical distinction lies between forms of engagement that enhance public accountability and inclusive governance, and those that privilege organizational interests, reinforce patronage, or exercise coercive influence outside democratic accountability mechanisms. Ormas can help address gaps in political representation and public service provision, but their contribution depends on whether they remain responsive to the communities they claim to represent. Ultimately, their democratic significance lies not simply in their capacity to mobilize society or gain access to government, but in whether they can translate societal demands into more accountable, responsive, and inclusive governance without becoming instruments of political domination.

Democracy requires not only the presence of political parties but also the active participation of other elements driven by civil society (Wojczewski et.al, 2023). Ormas represent a formal consolidation of civil society into organized entities. Although the roles within democracy differ across groups, they remain integrated into shared objectives that ensure the proper functioning of

the political system (Asrinaldi & Yusoff, 2023). The existence of Ormas complements the work of political parties by broadening avenues for civic engagement. Nevertheless, government co-optation has reduced the capacity of many Ormas to focus on community empowerment. Such co-optation strategies, as Araf (2022) argues, reflect broader governmental efforts to secure political legitimacy through Ormas' organizational strength.

The establishment of Ormas embodies the principle of constitutional democracy as articulated in Article 28E, Paragraph 3 of the 1945 Constitution, which guarantees citizens the right to express opinions and engage in organizational activities, both individually and collectively, within formal associations. Importantly, Ormas operate not only in the political realm but also in social, cultural, and economic domains. Their role in community empowerment aligns with the notion of substantive democracy, in which the promotion of social welfare is integral to democratic consolidation. Although the distribution of welfare is primarily the responsibility of the state, Ormas, such as Muhammadiyah, with its extensive experience in social service provision (Nurhayati et al., 2020), often complement and assist governmental efforts. Without such constitutional guarantees and substantive practices, democratic development in Indonesia would remain stunted.

Nonetheless, challenges to Ormas persist alongside democratic development. These challenges stem not only from government restrictions, as under the New Order's corporatist policies, but also during the Reformasi period. The extent of pressure on Ormas largely depends on the character of the ruling regime. Governments do not always suppress critical Ormas directly; instead, they may mobilize alternative forces, including rival Ormas or informal civil society groups, to confront and delegitimize more critical organizations. In many cases, political elites themselves have threatened Ormas by leveraging their affiliated political networks (Haryanto, 2020). Such practices remain prevalent, particularly in regions with homogeneous populations, where Ormas advocating pluralism face resistance from locally entrenched groups. Frequently, issues of religious identity are politicized to obstruct pluralist agendas, thereby undermining democratic development (Hadiwasito, 2024) .

While Ormas are constitutionally permitted to operate across various sectors, their ability to function as genuine catalysts of democracy is often constrained in practice. Several conditions are essential for Ormas to fulfill this role effectively in a developing democracy. First, Ormas must maintain autonomy in executing their mandates. Autonomy requires both competent human resources and sustainable, independent financial support. The lack of these resources renders Ormas vulnerable to external intervention, which compromises their independence. Second, internal solidarity among Ormas members is critical to sustaining organizational goals. This solidarity is closely tied to financial sustainability; without adequate resources, many Ormas face dissolution or debilitating internal conflicts, which undermine their democratic functions (Lindawaty, 2022). Third, strong public support for Ormas is vital. Such support not only motivates Ormas to pursue their empowerment agenda but also provides a foundation for broader civic participation in national life.

Not all Ormas possess the autonomy, cohesion, and public legitimacy required to perform their roles effectively. This unevenness directly affects the quality of democracy. The greater the number of Ormas that are independent, internally solid, and publicly trusted, the greater the likelihood that democracy will flourish. Ormas with these characteristics can foster community self-reliance, thereby encouraging meaningful political participation. Since governments cannot meet all the needs of citizens in their empowerment efforts, collaboration between Ormas and the state becomes essential for building a stronger democratic system.

In Indonesia, Ormas cannot be permanently categorized as either interest groups or pressure groups. Both are modes of political action that can be used by the same organization, depending on the issue, political access, the level of threat to the organization's interests, the government's response, and the need to maintain the organization's survival. The following table summarizes the discussion above by outlining the development of Ormas in Indonesia and its implications for democracy.

Table 1. Changes in the Political Strategy of Ormas

Dimension	New Order / Previous Condition	Political Strategy	Representative Cases
Political role	Controlled social organizations	Interest representation/ pressure	Muhammadiyah, FPI
State relationship	State domination	Cooperation/advocacy	NU, Muhammadiyah, GRIB Jaya
Organizational transformation	Social/ community organizations	Strategic switching	Nasdem, Labour Party
Organizational survival	Dependence on state	Accommodation, lobbying, mobilization	Jawara, GRIB Jaya
Democratic orientation	Restricted pluralism	Inclusion/ exclusion	FPI, HTI, pluralist CSOs

Source: Processed data

IV. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that the political role of mass organizations (Ormas) in Indonesia is neither fixed nor confined to a single organizational function. Rather, Ormas may shift between interest representation and political pressure depending on political access, the issues they pursue, perceived threats to their interests, and the need to sustain organizational survival. This strategic flexibility has enabled Ormas to contribute to political participation, civic engagement, and democratic representation, but it has also made them vulnerable to co-optation by political elites and the state. The study therefore shows that the relationship between Ormas and democracy is fundamentally shaped by the interaction between organizational autonomy and state civil society relations. When Ormas retain autonomy and pursue public interests, their political engagement can strengthen democratic consolidation; conversely, when they become dependent on political patronage or are instrumentalized for elite interests, their mobilizational capacity may undermine democratic pluralism and accountability.

Theoretically, these findings suggest that interest groups and pressure groups should be understood not necessarily as distinct types of organizations, but as different modes of political action adopted by Ormas in response to changing political and policy environments. This perspective contributes to a more dynamic understanding of state civil society relations in post-authoritarian democracies, where Ormas may simultaneously function as agents of democratization and instruments of power mobilization. Practically, strengthening their democratic role requires institutional measures that protect organizational autonomy, increase transparency in funding and state Ormas partnerships, and strengthen their capacity for civic and political education. The state should therefore regulate Ormas through transparent and consistent rules while avoiding selective co-optation, allowing them to function as autonomous channels of representation and effective counterbalances to state and political-party power.

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Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to assist in understanding and discussing relevant theoretical concepts and to support the translation of the author's writing into academic English. AI was not used to generate the article as a whole. The author retains full responsibility for the article's arguments, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions.

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