COMPUTATIONAL STUDY OF PROTON TRANSFER IN RESTRICTED SULFONIC ACID FOR PROTON EXCHANGE MEMBRANE FUEL CELL

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DEDICATION

To my beloved mom and dad

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ABSTRACT

Interest in the use of fuel cell as highly efficient, clean energy conversion device has been rapidly increasing over the past twenty years. Currently, proton exchange membrane fuel cells (PEMFC) are regarded as the paramount type of fuel cell due to their wide range of applicability. Perfluorosulfonic acid (PFSA) ionomer Nafion[®] by DuPont remains the typical membrane in PEMFC under development today, despite well recognized drawbacks which include limitations in thermal stability. Recent studies have found that although the polymer-zeolite composite membranes have lower value of proton conductivity than Nafion[®], polymer-zeolite composites show a more stable performance at high temperature. In this study, the proton transfer mechanism of zeolite functionalized sulfonic acid with water molecules is investigated using density functional theory (DFT) calculation at PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) level of theory. The systems were constructively built up by modifying the crystal structure of Linde Type A (LTA) zeolite functionalized sulfonic acid side chains, by varying the degree of separation of sulfonic acid side chains (2T, 3T and 4T) as well as the alkyl chain length (n=3, 5, 7) in order to study the effect of proton transfer at different distance and different chain length. Extensive searches for minimum energy conformations from 1 to 6 explicit water molecules revealed that 2T distance gives the best results for propyl sulfonic acid side chain, meanwhile 4T distance gives the best result for pentyl and heptyl sulfonic acid side chains, indicated by the minimum water molecules required to initiate second proton dissociation. The results have shown several agreements with previous *ab initio* calculation regarding polymeric fragments where partial dissociation of the protons in the fragments occurs at water contents of less than 3 H₂Os/SO₃H. Furthermore, we found that water distributions that facilitate a higher degree of dissociation and separation of the protons are important factors in stabilizing the fragments.

ABSTRAK

Kepentingan dalam penggunaan sel bahan api sebagai peranti penukaran tenaga yang sangat cekap dan bersih telah semakin meningkat dalam tempoh dua puluh tahun yang lalu. Pada masa ini, membran pertukaran proton sel bahan api (PEMFC) dianggap sebagai jenis yang paling utama kerana penggunaannya yang meluas. Ionomer asid perfluorosulfonik (PFSA) Nafion[®] oleh DuPont digunakan sebagai membran biasa dalam PEMFC hingga ke hari ini dan masih dalam penambahbaikan, walaupun terdapat kelemahan, termasuklah kurang kestabilan terma. Kajian terbaru mendapati bahawa walaupun membran komposit polimerzeolit mempunyai nilai kekonduksian proton yang lebih rendah daripada Nafion[®], komposit polimer-zeolit menunjukkan prestasi yang lebih stabil pada suhu tinggi. Dalam kajian ini, mekanisma pemindahan proton zeolit asid sulfonik dengan molekul air disiasat menggunakan pengiraan teori ketumpatan berfungsi (DFT) pada tahap PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3). Sistem telah disimulasikan dengan memodifikasi struktur kristal zeolit Linde Type A (LTA) dengan kumpulan berfungsi asid sulfonik, dengan mengubah jarak antara rantaian sisi asid sulfonik (2T, 3T dan 4T) dan panjang rantai alkil (n=3, 5, 7) untuk mengkaji kesan pemindahan proton pada jarak dan panjang rantaian yang berbeza. Kajian struktur tenaga minimum pada 1-6 molekul air, jelas menunjukkan bahawa jarak 2T memberikan hasil yang terbaik untuk rantaian propil asid sulfonik manakala jarak 4T memberikan hasil yang terbaik untuk rantaian pentil dan heptil asid sulfonik, di mana minimum molekul air diperlukan untuk memulakan penceraian proton kedua. Hasil kajian mendapati beberapa persamaan dengan pengiraan ab initio pada kajian sebelum ini terhadap struktur polimer di mana penceraian separa proton dalam sistem berlaku pada kandungan air kurang daripada 3 H₂Os/SO₃H. Tambahan pula, kami mendapati bahawa pengagihan air yang memudahkan tahap penceraian dan pemisahan proton yang lebih tinggi adalah faktor penting dalam menstabilkan sistem.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	TITLE	PAGE	
	DECLARATION	ii	
	DEDICATION	iii	
	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv	
	ABSTRACT	v	
	ABSTRAK	vi	
	TABLE OF CONTENTS	vii	
	LIST OF TABLES	X	
	LIST OF FIGURES	xiii	
	LIST OF SYMBOLS/ABBREVIATIONS	xix	
1	INTRODUCTION	1	
	1.1 Background of Study	1	
	1.2 Problem Statement	3	
	1.3 Objectives of Study	3	
	1.4 Scope/Limitation of Study	4	
2	LITERATURE REVIEW	5	
	2.1 Proton Exchange Membrane Fuel Cell (PEMFC)	5	
	2.1.1 Alternative PEMs in PEMFC Industry	7	
	2.1.1.1 Modified Nafion [®] Composite Membranes	8	
	2.1.1.2 Functionalized Non-fluorinated	9	
	Membranes and Composite Membrane		
	2.1.1.3 Acid-base Composite Membranes	10	
	2.2 Proton Transport Mechanisms in PEMs	11	
	2.3 Zeolite	13	

		2.3.1 Proton Mobility in Zeolite	15
	2.4	Computational Chemistry	16
		2.4.1 Quantum Mechanics (QM)	18
		2.4.1.1 Schrödinger Equation	18
		2.4.2 Ab Initio Methods	21
		2.4.3 Density Functional Theory (DFT)	21
		2.4.4 Semi Empirical Method Basis Set	23
		2.4.4.1 Parametric Method Number 3 (PM3)	23
		2.4.5 Molecular Mechanics (MM)	25
		2.4.6 ONIOM Method of Calculation	26
		2.4.7 Basis Set	28
3	RES	SEARCH METHODOLOGY	30
-	3.1	Building up the Systems	30
	3.2	Optimization of Structures	32
	3.3	Analysis of the Results	33
	3.4	Flow Chart	34
4	RES	SULTS AND DISCUSSION	35
	4.1	Method Development	35
	4.2	Method Determination	40
4.3 Hydrated Unrestricted Sulfonic Acid Fragmeter		Hydrated Unrestricted Sulfonic Acid Fragments	43
		4.3.1 Unrestricted Propyl Sulfonic Acid Fragments	43
		4.3.2 Unrestricted Pentyl Sulfonic Acid Fragments	50
		4.3.3 Unrestricted Heptyl Sulfonic Acid Fragments	55
	4.4	"Dry" fragments of restricted two sulfonic acid side	61
		chains at different distance on T8 site of zeolite	
		4.4.1 "Dry" fragments of restricted two propyl	62
		sulfonic acid side chains at 2T, 3T and 4T	
		distances	
		4.4.2 "Dry" fragments of restricted two pentyl	64
		sulfonic acid side chain at 2T, 3T and 4T	
		distances	
		4.4.3 "Dry" fragment of restricted two heptyl	65

		sulfonic acid side chain at 2T, 3T and 4T		
		distances		
4.5	5 Hydrated fragments of restricted two sulfonic acid 67			
	side c	hains at different distance on T8 site of zeolite		
	4.5.1	Restricted propyl sulfonic acid fragments at	68	
		2T, 3T and 4T distances		
	4.5.2	Restricted pentyl sulfonic acid fragments at	74	
		2T, 3T and 4T distances		
	4.5.3	Restricted heptyl sulfonic acid fragments at	81	
		2T, 3T and 4T distances		
	4.5.4	Conclusion	88	
CO	NCLUS	SION AND RECOMMENDATION	90	

REFERENCES

5

93

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE NO.	TITLE	PAGE
4.1	Structural parameters of	38
	Si(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H)OAl(OH) ₂ OSi(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃	
	H) fragments.	
4.2	Total energies and computational cost of optimized	39
	Si(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H)OAl(OH) ₂ OSi(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃	
	H) fragments.	
4.3	Structural parameters of	41
	Si(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₅ SO ₃ H)OAl(OH) ₂ OSi(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃	
	H) and	
	Si(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₇ SO ₃ H)OAl(OH) ₂ OSi(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃	
	H) fragments.	
4.4	Total energies of	41
	Si(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₅ SO ₃ H)OAl(OH) ₂ OSi(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃	
	H) and	
	Si(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₇ SO ₃ H)OAl(OH) ₂ OSi(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃	
	H) fragments.	
4.5	Binding energies of two propyl sulfonic acid side chains	44
	fragments.	
4.6	Structural data from optimized hydrated two propyl	44
	sulfonic acid fragments.	
4.7	Binding energies of two pentyl sulfonic acid side chains	50
	fragments.	
4.8	Structural data from optimized two pentyl sulfonic acid	50
	fragments.	

4.9	Binding energies of two heptyl sulfonic acid side chains	56
	fragment.	
4.10	Structural data from optimized two heptyl sulfonic acid	56
	fragments.	
4.11	Total energies of two restricted two propyl, pentyl and	62
	heptyl sulfonic acid side chains fragments attached at three	
	different distances on T8 sites of zeolite.	
4.12	Structural parameters of "dry" fragments of restricted two	62
	propyl sulfonic acid side chains at 2T, 3T and 4T	
	distances.	
4.13	Structural parameters of "dry" fragments of restricted two	64
	pentyl sulfonic acid side chains at 2T, 3T and 4T	
	distances.	
4.14	Structural parameters of "dry" fragments of restricted two	66
	heptyl sulfonic acid side chains at 2T, 3T and 4T	
	distances.	
4.15	Binding energies of optimized restricted two propyl	68
	sulfonic acid side chains fragments at 2T, 3T and 4T	
	distances.	
4.16	Structural data from optimized two propyl sulfonic acid	68
	fragments at 2T distance.	
4.17	Structural data from optimized two propyl sulfonic acid	70
	fragments at 3T distance.	
4.18	Structural data from optimized two propyl sulfonic acid	72
	fragments at 4T distance.	
4.19	Binding energies of optimized restricted two pentyl	74
	sulfonic acid side chains fragments at 2T, 3T and 4T	
	distances.	
4.20	Structural data from optimized two pentyl sulfonic acid	75
	fragments at 2T distance.	
4.21	Structural data from optimized two pentyl sulfonic acid	77
	fragments at 3T distance.	

4.22	Structural data from optimized two pentyl sulfonic aci	
	fragments at 4T distance.	
4.23	Binding energies of optimized restricted two heptyl	81
	sulfonic acid side chains fragments at 2T, 3T and 4T	
	distances.	
4.24	Structural data from optimized two heptyl sulfonic acid	81
	fragments at 2T distance.	
4.25	Structural data from optimized two heptyl sulfonic acid	84
	fragments at 3T distance.	
4.26	Structural data from optimized two heptyl sulfonic acid	86
	fragments at 4T distance.	

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE NO.	TITLE			
2.1	Schematic design of PEMFC [5].	6		
2.2	Classification of membranes based on materials	7		
	(perfluorinated, partially fluorinated and non-			
	fluorinated) and preparation method (acid-base blends			
	and others) [15].			
2.3	Nafion membrane and its preparation scheme [17].	8		
2.4	Chemical structure of polymer electrolyte membranes	10		
	based on hydrocarbon polymers [21].			
2.5	Structure of basic polymers (a-d) and acidic polymers	11		
	(e-f) [15].			
2.6	The simple scheme of proton hopping mechanism [21].			
2.7	The schematic design of the vehicular mechanism as	13		
	proton conduction in polymer/nano-particle composite			
	membranes [29].			
2.8	The replacement of Si^{4+} by Al^{3+} in tetrahedron yields a	14		
	negative charge [30].			
2.9	The building steps of zeolite framework [31].	15		
2.10	The ONIOM method. (A) The onion skin-like layers	27		
	and models. (B) The two-layer ONIOM method. (C)			
	Three-layer ONIOM method [46].			
3.1	Double propyl sulfonic acid were attached to PM3	31		
	optimized (Si(OH) ₃ OAl(OH) ₂ OSi(OH) ₃) backbone.			
	The colored spheres represent: red - oxygen, blue -			
	silicon, yellow - sulphur, grey - carbon, white -			

xiii

	hydrogen, green - aluminium	(applied for all	
	structures).		
3.2	Double propyl sulfonic acid side cha	ains were attached 32	
	to (a) 2T; (b) 3T and (c) 4T distan	ce. The low level	
	atoms are indicated by wire frame	atoms, high level	
	atoms are shown as spheres (applie	d for all ONIOM	
	structures).		
3.3	Flow chart of research activities.	34	
4.1	Fully optimized (PM3)	structure of 36	
	Si(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H)OAl(OH) ₂ OSi(OH) ₂ (-		
	O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H) fragment.		
4.2	Fully optimized ONIOM (B3LYP/	6-311G(d,p):PM3) 36	
	structure	of	
	Si(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H)OAl(OH) ₂ OS	Si(OH) ₂ (-	
	O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H) fragment.		
4.3	Fully optimized PM3/C	ONIOM(B3LYP/6- 37	
	311G(d,p):PM3) structu	of of	
	Si(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H)OAl(OH) ₂ OS	Si(OH) ₂ (-	
	O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H) fragment.		
4.4	Fully optimized (B3LYP/6-311G(d	l,p)) structure of 37	
	Si(OH) ₂ (O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H)OAl(OH) ₂ OSi(OH) ₂ (-		
	O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H) fragment.		
4.5	Fully optimized (PM3/B3LYP/6-31	1G(d,p)) structure 38	
	of $Si(OH)_2(O(CH_2)_3SO_3H)OAl(OH)_2OSi(OH)_2(-$		
	$O(CH_2)_3SO_3H)$ fragment.		
4.6	Fully optimized structures of Si(OH	$)_2(O(CH_2)_5SO_3H)-$ 42	
	$OAl(OH)_2OSi(OH)_2(-O(CH_2)_3SO_3H)$ complexes for (a)		
	ONIOM (B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)) level of theory;	
	(b) PM3/ONIOM (B3LYP/6-311G(c	l,p):PM3) level of	
	theory.		
4.7	Fully optimized structures of Si(OH	$)_2(O(CH_2)_7SO_3H)-$ 42	
	OAl(OH) ₂ OSi(OH) ₂ (-O(CH ₂) ₃ SO ₃ H)	complexes for (a)	

ONIOM (B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) level of theory; (b) PM3/ONIOM (B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) level of theory.

- 4.8 Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) 45
 of two propyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition
 of one water molecule. Hydrogen bonds are shown by
 dashed line and hydrogen bond distances presented are
 in Å (applied for all optimized structures).
- 4.9 Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) 45 of two propyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition of two water molecules.
- 4.10OptimizedPM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)46of two propyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition
of three water molecules.
- 4.11 Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) 47 of two propyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition of four water molecules.
- 4.12 Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) 48
 of two propyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition
 of five water molecules.
- 4.13 Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) 49 of two propyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition of six water molecules.
- 4.14 Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) 51 of two pentyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition of one water molecule.
- 4.15 Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) 52 of two pentyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition of two water molecules.
- 4.16 Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) 53 of two pentyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition of three water molecules.

XV

4.17	Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)	53
	of two pentyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition of	
	four water molecules.	
4.18	Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)	54
	of two pentyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition of	
	five water molecules.	
4.19	Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)	55
	of two pentyl sulfonic acid side chains upon addition of	
	six water molecules.	
4.20	Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)	57
	of two heptyl sulfonic acid side chains fragment upon	
	addition of one water molecule.	
4.21	Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)	57
	of two heptyl sulfonic acid side chains fragment upon	
	addition of two water molecules.	
4.22	Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)	58
	of two heptyl sulfonic acid side chains fragment upon	
	addition of three water molecules.	
4.23	Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)	59
	of two heptyl sulfonic acid side chains fragment upon	
	addition of four water molecules.	
4.24	Optimized PM3/B3LYP/6-311G(d,p): PM3 of two	60
	heptyl sulfonic acid side chains fragment upon addition	
	of five water molecules.	
4.25	Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)	61
	of two heptyl sulfonic acid side chains fragment upon	
	addition of six water molecules.	
4.26	Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)	63
	of restricted two propyl sulfonic acid fragment at: (a)	
	2T distance, (b) 3T distance and (c) 4T distance on T8	
	site of zeolite.	
4.27	Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3)	65

xvi

of restricted two pentyl sulfonic acid fragment at: (a) 2T distance, (b) 3T distance and (c) 4T distance on T8 site of zeolite.

- 4.28 Optimized PM3/ONIOM(B3LYP/6-311G(d,p):PM3) 67 of restricted two heptyl sulfonic acid fragment at: (a) 2T distance, (b) 3T distance and (c) 4T distance on T8 site of zeolite.
- 4.29 Fully optimized propyl sulfonic acid fragments at 2T 69 distance after addition of: (a) one water molecule; (b) two water molecules; (c) three water molecules.
- 4.30 Fully optimized propyl sulfonic acid fragments at 3T 71 distance after addition of: (a) one water molecule; (b) two water molecules; (c) three water molecules.
- 4.31 Fully optimized propyl sulfonic acid fragments at 4T 73 distance after addition of: (a) one water molecule; (b) two water molecules; (c) three water molecules; (d) four water molecules; (e) five water molecules; (f) six water molecules.
- 4.32 Fully optimized pentyl sulfonic acid fragments at 2T 76 distance after addition of: (a) one water molecule; (b) two water molecules; (c) three water molecules; (d) four water molecules; (e) five water molecules.
- 4.33 Fully optimized pentyl sulfonic acid fragments at 3T 78 distance after addition of: (a) one water molecule; (b) two water molecules; (c) three water molecules; (d) four water molecules.
- 4.34 Fully optimized pentyl sulfonic acid fragments at 4T 80 distance after addition of: (a) one water molecule; (b) two water molecules; (c) three water molecules.
- 4.35 Fully optimized heptyl sulfonic acid fragments at 2T 82 distance after addition of: (a) one water molecule; (b) two water molecules; (c) three water molecules; (d)

xvii

four water molecules; (e) five water molecules.

4.36	Fully optimized heptyl sulfonic acid fragments at 3T	85	
	distance after addition of: (a) one water molecule; (b)		
	two water molecules; (c) three water molecules; (d)		
	four water molecules; (e) five water molecules; (f) six		
	water molecules.		
4.37	Fully optimized heptyl sulfonic acid fragments at 4T	87	
	distance after addition of: (a) one water molecule; (b)		
	two water molecules; (c) three water molecules; (d)		
	four water molecules.		

LIST OF SYMBOLS/ABBREVIATIONS

Ψ	-	Wavefunction
λ	-	Wavelength
Ĥ	-	Hamiltonion operator
Е	-	Total energy of particle
∇	-	Laplacian operator
V	-	Potential energy
x	-	Distance
т	-	Mass
r, θ, φ	-	Spherical coordinate
Ν	-	Normalization constant
PFSA	-	Perfluorosulfonic acid
PEM	-	Proton Exchange Membrane
PEMFC	-	Proton Exchange Membrane Fuel Cell
MEA	-	Membrane Electrode Assembly
DFT	-	Density Functional Theory
B3LYP	-	(Becke, three parameter, Lee-Yang-Par)
GTO	-	Gaussian Type Orbital
HF	-	Hartree Fock
PM3	-	Parameterized Model 3
STO	-	Slater Type Orbital
QM	-	Quantum Mechanics
MM	-	Molecular Mechanics
ZDO	-	Zero Differential Overlap

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Apparently, environmental and energy saving issue have become one of crucial issue for human worldwide. In order to solve these problems, many efforts have being done to replace fossil fuels with other energy sources such as its connotation clean fuel. Fuel cells are on the edge of creating an enormous revolutionary change in the field of electricity due to their special properties. By definition, fuel cell is an electrochemical apparatus that convert the chemical energy of fuel without fuel combustion to electrical energy. Hence, in a fuel cell system, the chemical energy related to electrochemical reaction of the fuel with oxidant directly change into the water, electricity and heat.

Proton exchange membrane fuel cells (PEMFCs) have been discovered as capable power source for applications in transportation, stationary and portable device requiring clean, quiet and portable power [1]. The other major advantages include current prototype efficiency of up to 64%, high energy densities compared to batteries and the ability to operate on clean fuels while emitting no pollutants [2]. Despite these superiorities, diffusion of PEMFC technology into the market place is being limited by the cost and reliability issues [3]. According to Kreuer, research into fuel cells has grown exponentially over the last 15 years [4]. The key components in the fuel cell system are the proton exchange membranes (PEMs) itself [5]. In the case of polymer fuel cell, the major breakthrough in technology that have allowed significant improvement in the overall performance of PEMFC has been the modifications of Nafion[®] by Dupont.

In 1970s, a chemically stable cation-exchange membrane based on sulfonated poly-tetrafluoro-ethylene was first developed by Dupont as Nafion[®] leading to a large scale use of this membrane in the chor-alkali production industry and energy storage or conversion system (fuel cell). This Nafion[®] membrane was selected as a standard membrane for polymeric electrolyte fuel cell [6]. However, it has a number of drawbacks that need to be overcome, which is the high cost, due to its complicated system construction, the durability, and the poor performance at temperature above 80°C due to the loss of water. Besides, the CO poisoning at the anode and environmental hazards related with its dispose have caused the development of new membrane which include organic and inorganic hybrid membrane by using silica as support material [7]. This critical situation leads to the appropriate preservation and sustainable development strategies attempt to the production of green materials which are safer to users and more environmental friendly.

Performance, durability and cost are the three major properties known as "iron triangle" that need to be taken care of in order to have excellent proton exchange membrane. Hence, researches have to focus to obtain the proton exchange membrane with high conductivity, low electroosmotic drag coefficient, good chemical and thermal stability, good mechanical properties and low cost [5]. Although hydrophobic silica particles are not proton conductors, inclusion of the hygroscopic silica particles in composite solid electrolytes is primary single functional that is for water retention. Clearly, bifunctional particles, being both hydrophilic and proton conducting are preferred to be used as proton conducting material. Thus, zeolite could be one of the suitable materials with the preferred properties due to its crystalline aluminasilicate with a uniform pore size [8]. Hamdan [9] also states that nano zeolites are potential candidates to be used as proton conducting membrane instead of silica due to their significant moderate proton conductivity, excellent water retention at high temperature and molecular sieving capabilities. In addition, although the polymer-zeolite composite membranes have the lower values of proton conductivity than Nafion, polymer-zeolite composites show a more stable performance at high temperature [5]. In fact, nearly every application of zeolites has been driven by environmental concerns, or plays a significant role in reducing toxic waste and energy consumption [10].

1.2 Problem Statement

This decade, it is evidenced how our planet is being threatened by local and global environment problems as well as the consumption and supply of energy. PEMFC are one of the most promising clean energy technologies under development. The fuel cell membrane can be synthesized using different materials such as Nafion[®] or zeolite functionalized sulfonic acid used for PEMFC purposes. However, there is no fundamental computational study focusing on the proton transfer mechanism which occurs in zeolite PEM system which have been reported to be a better and cost effective performance material compared to Nafion[®] [8]. Therefore, simulation using density functional theory (DFT) calculation would help us to understand the role of each functionalized group and would eventually create a new possibility to use other type of compounds which can lead to the improvement of PEMFC material.

1.3 Objectives of Study

The aim of this research is to identify optimum condition of zeolite functionalized sulfonic acid for minimally hydrated PEMs. Thus, to achieve this aim, the related objectives are identified as follows:

- To observe the mechanism of proton transfer in restricted sulfonic acid for PEMFC.
- To study the effect of chain length to the proton transfer in restricted sulfonic acid for PEMFC.
- To study the effect of sulfonic acid side chain distance to the proton transfer in sulfonic acid for PEMFC.

1.4 Scope/Limitation of Study

This study only focused on the proton transfer mechanism in restricted sulfonic acid with alkyl chain up to 7 carbons (heptyl) for PEMFC. In addition, the selection of the basis set for the DFT calculation will reflect not only the accuracy, but also the time consumed for computing the job. It is evidenced that DFT method give a faster calculation compared to *ab initio*, but the accuracy of results still depends on the type of basis set used. Therefore, a few points stated above were taken into account in order to complete this project within time.

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