

# The History and Dynamics of Al-Awwabin Islamic Boarding School: From Tradition to a Modern Islamic Educational Institution in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

Al-Awwabin Islamic Boarding School is an important example of an Indonesian pesantren that developed from a traditional religious study circle into a modern Islamic educational institution. This article examines its establishment, institutional development, leadership dynamics, and educational modernization since Abuya KH. Abdurrahman Nawi initiated the As Shalafiyah study circle in 1962. The study employs a qualitative historical approach based on a literature review and analysis of online documents. The findings indicate that Al-Awwabin developed gradually through four stages: a traditional study-circle phase, the institutionalization of formal education, branch expansion, and the integration of formal and nonformal education. Its modernization is evident in the establishment of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs), and Madrasah Aliyah (MA); strengthened institutional governance; and the integration of classical Islamic-text studies with general education. The article argues that Al-Awwabin has successfully balanced tradition and modernity, thereby maintaining its relevance as an Islamic educational institution in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Pesantren, Al-Awwabin, History of Pesantren, Modernization of Islamic Education, Tradition and Reform.

## I. Introduction

Pesantren are Islamic educational institutions with deep roots in the historical development of Muslim society in Indonesia. They function not only as centers for transmitting religious knowledge but also as sites of character formation, moral development, and the reinforcement of Islamic identity within local communities. Their presence since the early spread of Islam demonstrates that pesantren have long constituted an integral part of Indonesia's social, cultural, and intellectual life. Over time, these institutions have continued to change in form, function, and educational orientation, evolving from informal religious study systems into more structured institutions integrated with the national education system (Al-Awwabin, 2023; Dhofier, 2011; Laduni, 2020; NU Online, 2020; Steenbrink, 1986). These changes demonstrate that pesantren are not static institutions. Rather, they possess an adaptive capacity that enables them to respond to changing circumstances. In response to educational modernization, globalization, and technological development, many pesantren have adopted formal education systems, expanded their institutional services, and strengthened organizational management. Such reforms, however, do not necessarily entail abandoning tradition. Many pesantren continue to preserve the study of classical Islamic texts, kiai-santri relationships, and

the spiritual values that distinguish them. Al-Awwabin Islamic Boarding School is one institution that exemplifies these dynamics. This capacity to combine curricular reform with the preservation of religious authority reflects the selective synthesis of modernity and tradition identified in Indonesian Islamic education (Lukens-Bull, 2001).

Al-Awwabin Islamic Boarding School merits scholarly attention because it grew from a modest traditional religious study circle into a modern pesantren offering a complete range of formal educational levels. This transformation reflects a gradual process of institutionalization, from a religious study group and educational institute to a foundation and, ultimately, a formal pesantren. At the same time, Al-Awwabin has preserved its traditional foundations through the study of classical Islamic texts, an emphasis on instrumental disciplines such as Arabic grammar (nahwu and sharaf), and an Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah Islamic orientation. This combination of tradition and modernization makes Al-Awwabin an important representation of institutional change among Indonesian pesantren. Studying Al-Awwabin is also important because of the institution's close association with Abuya KH. Abdurrahman Nawî. He was not only its founder but also a spiritual leader, educator, and social organizer who shaped the pesantren's development. His leadership was evident in his ability to guide Islamic study groups, develop formal and nonformal education, and ensure continuity in the institution's educational vision. Following his death in 2019, leadership passed to the next generation, thereby preserving institutional continuity. This article addresses two principal questions. First, how did Al-Awwabin Islamic Boarding School develop from a traditional religious study circle into a modern Islamic educational institution? Second, how did educational modernization occur at Al-Awwabin without eroding its traditional identity? Accordingly, this article aims to describe the establishment of Al-Awwabin, explain the stages of its institutional transformation, and analyze the forms of modernization implemented within its educational system. (Al-Awwabin, 2020, 2023; Albed News, 2018)

## II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

### 2.1. Pesantren as Traditional Islamic Educational Institutions

Dhofier (2011) conceptualizes pesantren as an educational and social system organized around the kiai, santri, mosque, residential setting, and the study of classical Islamic texts. Within this system, the kiai provides not only intellectual instruction but also moral authority and institutional direction. This framework is relevant to Al-Awwabin because its early development centered on Abuya KH. Abdurrahman Nawî, community-based religious study, and the transmission of classical Islamic knowledge. The institution's origins therefore reflect a broader pattern in which pesantren emerge through the authority of a religious scholar and gradually acquire a stable organizational form.

### 2.2. Institutional Modernization of Pesantren

Steenbrink (1986) explains that the development of Islamic education in Indonesia involved increasing interaction among pesantren, madrasas, and modern schools. The incorporation of graded classrooms, general subjects, formal qualifications, and state-recognized curricula did not simply replace pesantren education; rather, it produced hybrid institutional arrangements. Al-Awwabin's establishment of MI, MTs, and MA programs illustrates this process. Its formal schools provide nationally recognized education, while nonformal instruction continues to sustain the pesantren's religious curriculum and scholarly identity.

### 2.3. Tradition and Modernity in Pesantren Education

Lukens-Bull (2001) argues that modernity and tradition in Indonesian Islamic education should not be treated as mutually exclusive categories. Pesantren frequently adopt modern organizational and pedagogical practices while retaining classical texts, religious discipline, and the authority of the kiai. This

perspective provides an appropriate analytical lens for Al-Awwabin. Its modernization is selective rather than disruptive: formal education, branch expansion, and stronger governance have been added to an enduring foundation of classical Islamic-text study, Arabic grammatical sciences, moral formation, and Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah values.

#### 2.4. Previous Studies and Research Gap

Existing studies of Al-Awwabin have primarily examined particular dimensions of the institution. Salsabila (2019) focuses on character education, while studies in the UIN Jakarta Repository discuss the spiritual leadership and educational role of KH. Abdurrahman Nawi (Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, 2020-a, 2020-b). Institutional profiles and media sources provide important historical details but remain largely descriptive (Albed News, 2018). Consequently, limited scholarship has integrated the institution's historical origins, leadership succession, branch expansion, formal educational development, and continuing classical-text tradition within a single analytical account. This article addresses that gap by interpreting Al-Awwabin's development as a long-term negotiation between institutional modernization and the preservation of pesantren identity.

### III. Research Method

#### 3.1. Research Approach

This article employs a qualitative historical approach. The historical component traces Al-Awwabin's trajectory from its origins to its present development, while the qualitative component examines the social and educational meanings of the transformation within the pesantren. Through this approach, the authors not only present a historical chronology but also interpret institutional change within the context of pesantren traditions.

#### 3.2. Data Sources

The study draws on secondary sources, including the official website of Al-Awwabin Islamic Boarding School, institutional profiles, online articles, academic repositories, and school-profile data documenting the formal educational levels administered by the pesantren. These sources were used to reconstruct the institution's history and understand the direction of its modernization. Information from the pesantren's official website was compared with supporting sources to ensure data consistency.

#### 3.3. Analytical Techniques

The data were analyzed descriptively and analytically. The first stage involved identifying historical facts, including the year of establishment, branch development, the formal inauguration of the pesantren, and the introduction of formal educational levels. The second stage grouped the data into five broad themes: establishment, leadership, institutionalization, modernization, and educational identity. The third stage interpreted the data within the broader context of change among Indonesian pesantren. This procedure enabled the article to explain the relationship between tradition and modernity in Al-Awwabin's development.

## IV. Result and Discussion

### 4.1. The Origins of the As Shalafiyyah Study Circle

The history of Al-Awwabin Islamic Boarding School began with the traditional As Shalafiyyah religious study circle established by Abuya KH. Abdurrahman Nawî at his residence in West Tebet, South Jakarta, in 1962. At that time, religious activities were conducted in a simple format centered on a majelis taklim (Islamic study group) and the study of Islamic texts. The study circle became a center of religious instruction for the surrounding community and laid the foundation for a larger educational institution. The name As Shalafiyyah reflected a commitment to following the example of the salaf, earlier generations of Muslim scholars regarded as authoritative in religious understanding. This initial phase reflected a defining characteristic of pesantren: they often emerge organically from communities rather than formal institutions. In this model, public trust in the kiai is the principal factor sustaining the institution. Abuya KH. Abdurrahman Nawî was known as a religious scholar deeply committed to education, an expert in Arabic grammar, and an active leader of numerous Islamic study groups in Jakarta and surrounding areas. His charisma and scholarly expertise enabled the initially small study circle to develop into a learning center that earned increasing public trust.

### 4.2. From an Islamic Study Group to an Educational Institute

The next stage began when the As Shalafiyyah study circle developed into the Al-Awwabin educational institute. This change marked a more serious institutionalization of education. Whereas religious activities had been informal during the initial stage, the institute introduced a more systematic educational structure. This transformation was significant because it reflected an awareness of the need to establish a sustainable system that could be transmitted to subsequent generations. In the pesantren context, the educational institute served as a bridge between a traditional religious study circle and a formal educational institution. The transformation into an educational institute also demonstrated that Abuya moved beyond a personal model of instruction and began organizing the institution for future growth. This step provided an important foundation for Al-Awwabin's expansion into other areas. More formal educational branches were subsequently established, including those in Sawangan and Bedahan, Depok. This development indicates that the pesantren was conceived not merely as a place of study but as a social institution with a long-term vision.(Al-Awwabin, 2023; Albed News, 2018)

### 4.3. Formal Inauguration and Institutional Expansion

According to the available sources, Al-Awwabin Islamic Boarding School in Pancoran Mas, Depok, was formally inaugurated in 1989 by Minister of Religious Affairs Munawir Sjadzali and KH. Idham Chalid, Chair of the Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU). This inauguration represented an important milestone because it signaled formal recognition of the pesantren as an Islamic educational institution. The institution had previously developed gradually from a religious study circle into an educational institute. Following its inauguration, Al-Awwabin became more firmly established as a pesantren with social, religious, and institutional legitimacy.(Al-Awwabin, 2023; Albed News, 2018). Al-Awwabin's institutional expansion was not confined to a single location. Its official website states that the pesantren developed into a foundation with branches in Tebet, South Jakarta; Sawangan, Depok; and Bedahan, Depok. This expansion pattern demonstrates Al-Awwabin's capacity to develop a network-based educational model. The pesantren was no longer bound to a single physical location but extended across several sites to meet the needs of a broader community. This strategy is characteristic of urban pesantren modernization that adapts to social change.

#### 4.4. Modernization of Formal Education

One of the most prominent features of Al-Awwabin's development was the introduction of formal education. During the 1970s, new buildings were constructed to provide education at the Tsanawiyah and Aliyah levels. The branches in Depok subsequently offered Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs), and Madrasah Aliyah (MA). The introduction of formal education signaled Al-Awwabin's entry into a more systematic phase of institutional modernization. The pesantren was no longer exclusively a center for religious study but had become an educational institution recognized within the national system. This modernization emerged from the community's demand for more comprehensive education. Parents wanted their children not only to acquire religious knowledge but also to obtain formal qualifications that would provide access to higher education and employment. Al-Awwabin responded by offering school-based education integrated with the pesantren system. Students continued to study religion while also taking general academic subjects. This integrated model demonstrates the pesantren's successful adaptation to contemporary educational demands.

#### 4.5. Nonformal Education and the Classical Islamic-Text Tradition

Despite developing formal education, Al-Awwabin has retained nonformal education as the core of its pesantren system. The study of kitab kuning (classical Islamic texts), the strengthening of instrumental disciplines such as nahwu and sharaf, and moral formation remain central to student life. According to the institutional profile, Abuya emphasized the importance of these disciplines as tools for understanding classical Islamic texts. This emphasis demonstrates that modernization at Al-Awwabin has not replaced tradition but has instead added new dimensions to its educational system. The continued study of classical Islamic texts demonstrates that the institution has preserved its pesantren identity. This continuity is important because the strength of pesantren lies precisely in the depth of their scholarly traditions and moral authority. Modernization that fails to preserve this traditional foundation may cause pesantren to lose their distinctive character. Al-Awwabin appears to understand this principle well. Its formal and nonformal educational programs are therefore designed to complement rather than displace one another.

#### 4.6. The Leadership of Abuya KH. Abdurrahman Nawî

Major changes in Al-Awwabin's history cannot be separated from the leadership of Abuya KH. Abdurrahman Nawî. He was known as an influential Betawi religious scholar who was active in numerous Islamic study groups and deeply committed to educating santri. His leadership was spiritual, charismatic, and pedagogical. In the pesantren tradition, such a leader serves as a source of legitimacy, determines institutional direction, and safeguards its values. Abuya not only founded the institution but also created an educational culture that continues to thrive. After Abuya's death in 2019, leadership of Al-Awwabin passed to his eldest son, KH. Drs. Ahmad Mukhtar. This succession affirms the pesantren's preservation of genealogical continuity, a characteristic of many traditional institutions in Indonesia. Family-based leadership succession helped maintain the stability of the institution's vision. In Al-Awwabin's case, this transition also demonstrates that modernization can proceed alongside a traditional model of leadership succession.

#### 4.7. Islamic Identity and the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah Orientation

Al-Awwabin affirms its Islamic identity through an Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah orientation shaped by the Nahdlatul Ulama tradition. This identity is evident in its study of classical texts, scholarly orientation, and moderate religious outlook. These characteristics strengthen Al-Awwabin's position as a pesantren that educates students who are not only knowledgeable but also ethical, tolerant, and engaged with community

life. In contemporary Indonesia, such qualities are highly relevant because pesantren are expected to serve as centers of religious moderation and guardians of social harmony. (Salsabila, 2019)

#### 4.8. The Meaning of Modernization for Al-Awwabin

Al-Awwabin's modernization can be understood as a process of reorganizing tradition to ensure its continued relevance. The pesantren has not abandoned the study of Islamic texts but has added formal education. It has not eliminated the kiai's leadership but has expanded its institutional structure. It has not discarded the salaf tradition but has integrated it with contemporary educational needs. Modernization at Al-Awwabin is therefore selective and adaptive. This model is significant because it demonstrates that pesantren can develop without losing their roots.

## V. Conclusion

Al-Awwabin Islamic Boarding School is an important example of the transformation of a traditional pesantren into a modern Islamic educational institution in Indonesia. Originating in the As Shalafiyah study circle established in 1962, the institution developed through successive stages as an educational institute, a foundation, and a formal pesantren with branches in Jakarta and Depok. The introduction of MI, MTs, and MA programs marked an educational modernization integrated with the national system, while the continued study of classical Islamic texts demonstrates the preservation of pesantren traditions. Al-Awwabin's success in integrating tradition and modernity is inseparable from the leadership of Abuya KH. Abdurrahman Nawawi and the continuity of the institutional vision maintained by subsequent generations. Al-Awwabin may therefore be regarded as a pesantren capable of adapting selectively to changing circumstances without losing its Islamic identity. Its experience demonstrates that pesantren modernization can succeed when it is built on strong traditional foundations, visionary leadership, and responsiveness to evolving community needs.

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