

The Historical Development of Islamic Educational Institutions and Its Implications for Indonesia's Education System

Ighfirli Ilyas¹, Abdul Rosyid Teguhdin Hamid²

^{1,2} Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Al-Hikmah Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia.
Email: ighfirliiylas890@gmail.com¹, rosyid.takmir61@gmail.com²

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: July 23, 2026
Revised: August 10, 2026
Accepted: August 14, 2026

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.52970/grdis.v6i4.2549>

ABSTRACT

The prominent role of religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, the establishment of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 1946, and the adoption of strategic policies—including the 1975 Joint Decree of the Three Ministers, Law No. 20 of 2003, and Law No. 18 of 2019—have provided formal legitimacy and strengthened the position of Islamic education. These developments have had far-reaching implications. Islamic education is now recognized as an integral and equal component of the national education system, plays a crucial role in shaping the nation's character and morality, and serves as a foundation for integrating general and religious knowledge. Nevertheless, Islamic education continues to face structural inequalities, including limited funding for nonformal religious education, particularly Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah (MDT) and Qur'anic Education Institutions (LPQ); compensation for nonpermanent teachers that remains below the regional minimum wage; inadequate pesantren infrastructure; and discrimination against madrasah graduates in admissions to public universities. Strong political commitment and equitable budget allocations are therefore necessary for Islamic education to fulfill its potential as a center for cultivating the moral character of Indonesia's younger generation and advancing the vision of Golden Indonesia 2045.

Keywords: Islamic Education, Pesantren, Madrasah, National Education System, Historical Development.

I. Introduction

Islamic education in Indonesia has deep historical roots dating to the arrival of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago in the thirteenth century through trade networks. Many merchants also served as missionaries and educators. During this early period, instruction lacked dedicated facilities, fixed schedules, and standardized subject matter; it therefore occurred primarily through interaction between missionaries and local communities. Islamization proceeded peacefully through several channels, including religious outreach, politics, marriage, and education, ultimately giving rise to Muslim communities across the archipelago. Once Muslim communities had formed, mosques were built as centers of worship and as the first educational institutions, providing instruction in Islamic creed, religious observance, and Qur'anic literacy. As the number of learners increased, the need arose for educational institutions beyond the mosque. Consequently, institutions such as pesantren, meunasah, rangkang, dayah, and surau developed with the support of local communities and the Islamic kingdoms of the period. Pesantren are the oldest Islamic educational institutions

in Indonesia. Historical accounts indicate that, by the early seventeenth century, a pesantren had been established in Java by Sunan Malik Ibrahim in Gresik in 1619.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, reformist ideas from the Middle East, introduced by Indonesian Muslim students returning from the Holy Land, brought new dynamics to Islamic education. Madrasahs emerged as institutions that combined the pesantren system with modern schooling, while instruction shifted from traditional methods toward a more structured, class-based system. In response to the changes associated with the Dutch colonial Ethical Policy, madrasahs began teaching general subjects alongside religious sciences. Religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah (founded in 1912) and Nahdlatul Ulama (founded in 1926) played major roles in advocating for and developing Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia. Both organizations became driving forces behind the establishment of madrasahs and modern Islamic schools that taught both religious and general subjects. Their contributions demonstrate Indonesian Muslims' strong awareness of the importance of a comprehensive and balanced education.

Following Indonesian independence, Islamic education entered a new phase marked by the growth of various reform-oriented Islamic educational institutions. Pesantren continued to evolve, producing a salafi pesantren model firmly grounded in the study of classical Islamic texts alongside a modern pesantren model that combined religious knowledge and science in its curriculum. This long trajectory demonstrates that Islamic education in Indonesia has consistently adapted to changing conditions without losing its identity. The colonial educational dichotomy between secular general education and separate traditional religious education created structural disparities and generated a need to integrate religious education into the national system of the newly independent state. Unifying the two educational pathways, which had developed separately under colonial rule, posed a major challenge for the new nation. Religious education, previously the responsibility of private religious institutions, needed formal recognition and an equal place within the national education system.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs provided an institutional solution by centralizing the administration of religious affairs and education, thereby ending the fragmented governance inherited from the colonial period. Its establishment conferred formal legitimacy on Islamic educational institutions and created an institutional framework for the planned and systematic development of religious education. Madrasahs underwent a significant transformation from marginal institutions into an integral part of the National Education System, particularly after the implementation of the 1975 Joint Decree of the Three Ministers. The decree was principally intended to improve the quality of madrasah education and formally recognize madrasahs as part of the national education system. Under this policy, madrasah curricula were standardized in relation to those of general schools, with 70 percent of instruction devoted to general subjects and 30 percent to religious subjects. During the New Order era, the revitalization of madrasahs and pesantren continued through policies that strengthened the legitimacy of Islamic education within the national system. Madrasahs gradually accepted government assistance in the form of material subsidies, while government-appointed religious education teachers gained acceptance and became particularly important in institutions experiencing teacher shortages. Changes in madrasahs extended beyond curricula and syllabi to their broader educational orientation, which increasingly addressed students' livelihood needs and future social status.

The Reform era brought stronger recognition of Islamic education through Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which explicitly established the equivalence of madrasahs and general schools. This recognition was reinforced by Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren, which affirmed pesantren as part of the national education system and identified their functions in education, religious outreach, and community empowerment. The law specifies five essential elements of a pesantren: a kiai or leader, resident students, dormitory facilities, a mosque or prayer hall, and pesantren instructional materials, namely the kitab kuning (classical Islamic texts) or *dirasat islamiyyah* (Islamic studies).

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Previous studies have examined the development of Islamic education in Indonesia from historical, institutional, and policy perspectives. Djamas (2009) describes the post-independence transformation of Islamic education, particularly the gradual integration of madrasahs and pesantren into the national education system. Similarly, Malik et al. (2025) trace the development of primary and Islamic education from the era of Islamic kingdoms to the Reform era, demonstrating that Islamic educational institutions have continuously adapted to political and social change. Historical accounts published by NU Online (2014) further illustrate the transformation of madrasahs from traditional religious institutions into formally recognized educational institutions that combine religious and general subjects. The literature also emphasizes the contribution of Islamic organizations to educational development. Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have played important roles in establishing schools, madrasahs, and pesantren that integrate Islamic values with modern education. Athifah et al. (2026) argue that these organizations helped expand access to education and encouraged institutional modernization while maintaining distinctive Islamic traditions. Their involvement demonstrates that the development of Islamic education in Indonesia has been driven not only by government policy but also by sustained community participation.

From a policy perspective, the 1975 Joint Decree of the Three Ministers, Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, and Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren represent major milestones in the formal recognition of Islamic education. Recent studies indicate that these regulations have strengthened the legal status of madrasahs and pesantren and promoted curricular integration (Garuda Kemdiktisaintek, 2025, 2026). Nevertheless, government publications and contemporary analyses continue to identify structural problems, including unequal funding, inadequate infrastructure, low teacher compensation, and unequal opportunities for graduates of Islamic educational institutions (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025). Although previous studies have addressed particular historical periods, institutions, or policies, relatively few have provided an integrated analysis of the historical development of Islamic educational institutions and its implications for Indonesia's contemporary education system. This study addresses that gap by examining the development of pesantren and madrasahs across major historical periods, analyzing the policies that shaped their transformation, and evaluating their contributions and continuing challenges within the national education system.

III. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative approach and a library research design. Library research encompasses a series of activities involving the collection, reading, recording, and analysis of documentary materials. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought an in-depth understanding of the historical development of Islamic educational institutions through textual data drawn from diverse sources rather than through field observations or statistical measurement. The study was descriptive and analytical: it systematically presented the facts and characteristics of the research object on the basis of the collected data and then analyzed them to develop comprehensive conclusions. A library research design was appropriate because the objects of inquiry—the history and policies of Islamic education—are documented in written sources. The principal data could therefore be obtained from physical libraries, digital repositories, and official archives.

The data sources used in this library research were divided into two principal categories: primary and secondary sources (Khairul & Ahdar, 2022). Primary sources are original materials obtained directly from their source and used as the study's principal references. In this study, they included official policy documents such as the 1975 Joint Decree of the Three Ministers, Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, and Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren, as well as foundational scholarly books addressing the historical development of Islamic education in Indonesia. Secondary sources complemented and enriched the analysis and included works by scholars of Islamic education, articles published in accredited academic journals,

official publications by religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (Mirzaqon & Purwoko, 2017), and other literature thematically related to the research topic. Sources were located in physical and digital libraries and academic repositories such as Garuda Kemdiktisaintek.

Data were collected through documentation, which involved gathering and examining written materials relevant to the study's focus. Documents are records of past events and may take the form of written texts, images, or major works. Data collection proceeded through the following steps: (1) gathering literature aligned with the research theme and objectives, including empirical information from books, journal articles, official and academic research reports, and other relevant sources; (2) classifying the literature by its importance as primary, secondary, or tertiary material; (3) extracting the required data in accordance with the research focus and documenting each source using accepted academic citation practices; (4) confirming or cross-checking data against primary or other sources to establish validity; and (5) organizing the data according to the study's analytical framework.

The data were examined using content analysis, a technique for systematically and objectively identifying, categorizing, and interpreting patterns, themes, and meanings. Following Miles and Huberman's framework, the analysis involved three stages. First, data reduction entailed summarizing the materials, selecting their central elements, focusing on important aspects, and excluding irrelevant information. Second, data display involved organizing the information systematically in narrative form according to the research themes. Third, conclusion drawing involved verifying the analysis and formulating final conclusions. The study adopted an inductive approach, beginning with specific data and developing more general conclusions. The collected materials were analyzed according to the periodization of Islamic education, strategic policies, and implications for the national education system.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this library study used triangulation, a process for assessing credibility by checking information across multiple sources (Sugiyono, 2018). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing and verifying information obtained from different but thematically related sources. This process included comparing evidence from books on the history of Islamic education, scholarly journal articles, official policy documents, and publications by religious organizations. Drawing on diverse and complementary literature enhanced the credibility of the findings. The study also employed sustained review by rechecking the identified information and presenting it accurately and systematically. These procedures ensured that the findings did not depend on a single source and reduced subjectivity in the analysis.

IV. Result and Discussion

The development of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia may be divided into several major periods. The first was the era of Islamic kingdoms in the archipelago, when Islamic education was conducted informally in mosques and pesantren established by wali and ulama (religious scholars). During this period, pesantren became centers for the study of Islamic religious sciences through the halaqah (study-circle) method, with the kitab kuning serving as the principal texts. Education emphasized moral and spiritual formation and produced religious scholars with a strong sensitivity to social and environmental issues. The second period corresponded to Dutch colonial rule, when pesantren and madrasahs adopted a noncooperative stance toward the colonial government and did not seek to prepare students for employment in the colonial workforce or bureaucracy. During this period, the madrasah was introduced as a class-based educational system that included general knowledge in constructive response to the colonial Ethical Policy. Pesantren and madrasahs instead became centers of resistance and the independence movement, as illustrated by the Jihad Resolution of October 22, 1945, which originated in a pesantren.

The third period extended from the early years of independence through the New Order. After the Ministry of Religious Affairs was established in 1946, graduates of religious schools—many without university degrees—constituted a substantial proportion of the personnel staffing religious affairs offices throughout Indonesia. Religious schools played an important role in literacy campaigns during the early independence period and contributed to the national objective of educating the population. This period culminated in the

1975 Joint Decree of the Three Ministers, which integrated madrasahs into the national education system. The fourth period extends from the Reform era to the present, during which Islamic education has received formal recognition through a range of regulations. Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System recognizes madrasahs as equivalent to general schools. Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren affirms state recognition of pesantren as part of the national education system. The currently implemented Merdeka Curriculum gives educational institutions flexibility to embed moderate Islamic values systematically and participatorily. These developments have broad implications for the national education system. First, Islamic education has become an integral and equally recognized component of that system. Second, Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren and madrasahs play an important role in shaping the nation's morality, ethics, and character amid globalization and the challenge of radicalism. Third, Islamic education provides a foundation for integrating knowledge and religion, enabling graduates to combine intellectual competence with a strong spiritual grounding. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain, particularly structural inequalities. Funding for nonformal religious education, including Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah (MDT) and Qur'anic Education Institutions (LPQ), remains severely limited and depends largely on community contributions. Many nonpermanent madrasah teachers continue to earn less than the regional minimum wage, and pesantren infrastructure is often inadequate. In addition, madrasah graduates continue to encounter discrimination in admissions to some public universities.

V. Conclusion

The history of Islamic education in Indonesia demonstrates that institutions such as pesantren and madrasahs have become inseparable from the national education system. From their traditional roots as centers of religious instruction in mosques and pesantren to the emergence of madrasahs integrating religious and general knowledge, Islamic educational institutions have consistently adapted to changing conditions without losing their identity. The contributions of religious organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, together with government policy administered through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, have strengthened the position of Islamic education within the national system. These developments have had far-reaching implications. Islamic education is not merely a formally recognized educational pathway; it is also an important foundation for cultivating the nation's character and morality. Amid globalization and the challenge of radicalism, the values of moderation and tolerance taught in pesantren and madrasahs provide an essential safeguard for national identity and integrity. Islamic education also advances national civilization through institutions capable of adapting to technological change and responding to contemporary needs.

Structural inequality, however, remains an urgent challenge. Inequitable budget allocations, low teacher compensation, and discrimination against madrasah graduates require strong political commitment and responsive policy. The state must ensure that disparities within the national education system no longer cause any Indonesian child to experience second-class citizenship. As Indonesia advances toward the Golden Indonesia 2045 vision, Islamic religious education should be positioned at the center of efforts to cultivate national morality and character and to develop a generation marked by integrity, tolerance, and global competitiveness. Long-term investment in Islamic education will help produce a generation that excels in science and technology while possessing strong character, upholding integrity, preparing for future challenges, and preserving the nation's identity.

References

- Djamas, N. (2009). *Dinamika pendidikan Islam di Indonesia pascakemerdekaan*. Rajawali Pers.
- Fatoni, A., Prasetyowati, F., & Sutiah. (2026). *Dinamika kebijakan pendidikan Islam di Indonesia: Analisis historis era Orde Lama, Orde Baru, dan Reformasi*. *Al-Muaddib: Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Kependidikan*, 8(1), 117–130.
- Hamzah, A. (2020). *Metode penelitian kepustakaan (library research)*. Literasi Nusantara.

- Hilmin, H., Noviani, D., & Yanuarti, E. (2023). Internalisasi nilai-nilai moderasi beragama dalam Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar Pendidikan Agama Islam. *Symfonia: Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam*, 3(1), 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.53649/symfonia.v3i1.34>
- Mahfudh, M. A. S. (2014, September 7). Madrasah dari masa ke masa. NU Online. <https://nu.or.id/taushiyah/madrasah-dari-masa-ke-masa-VBuql>
- Malik, M. S., Astuti, K. D., Ardhyantama, V., Imaduddin, M., Andrinigrum, H., & Wardani, H. K. (2025). The historical development of primary and Islamic education in Indonesia: From empire to Reform era. *DIDAKTIKA: Jurnal Pendidikan Sekolah Dasar*, 8(1), 33–44. <https://doi.org/10.21831/didaktika.v8i1.83921>
- Mirzaqon, A. T., & Purwoko, B. (2018). Studi kepustakaan mengenai landasan teori dan praktik konseling expressive writing. *Jurnal BK UNESA*, 8(1), 1–8. <https://ejournal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/jurnal-bk-unesa/article/view/22037>
- Nasar, M. F. (2025, October 14). Menjaga martabat sekolah agama. Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia. <https://kemenag.go.id/opini/menjaga-martabat-sekolah-agama-0gwk9>
- Permadi, D. P., & Yantari, H. F. (2024). Internalisasi moderasi beragama dalam Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar di SDN 02 Gempolan Kecamatan Kerjo Kabupaten Karanganyar Jawa Tengah melalui budaya sekolah. *Educandum: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan*, 10(1). <https://garuda.kemdiktisaintek.go.id/documents/detail/4794903>
- Republic of Indonesia. (2003). Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 20 Tahun 2003 tentang Sistem Pendidikan Nasional.
- Republic of Indonesia. (2019). Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 18 Tahun 2019 tentang Pesantren.
- Saleh, A. (2025, September 29). Urgensi pendidikan keagamaan Islam dalam sistem pendidikan nasional. Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia. <https://kemenag.go.id/opini/urgensi-pendidikan-keagamaan-islam-dalam-sistem-pendidikan-nasional-vvoHD>