



Research Article

Islamic Education Policy Reform: Political Dynamics and Curriculum Reorientation in the Merdeka Belajar Era

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Abstract. This research aims to conduct a multidimensional analysis of Islamic education policy reform in Indonesia (2021-2026) through three main pillars: political-regulatory contestation, curriculum reorientation, and digital governance. Utilizing a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) with the PRISMA protocol, the study synthesizes 60 key policy documents and reputable journal articles.

Findings reveal that while madrasas have achieved formal legal equality, "fiscal segregation" persists due to the authority dualism between centralized ministries and decentralized local governments. In the curriculum sector, the "Merdeka Belajar" policy serves as an instrument for the "decolonization of reason," enabling transdisciplinary science-religion integration; however, its effectiveness is hampered by technostructural resistance. Furthermore, digital quality assurance has birthed a formalistic "digital bureaucracy" that shifts the teacher's role to a mere data operator. In conclusion, this research constructs a "Hybrid-Contextual" policy model that synergizes Islamic spirituality with technological advancement within a wasathiyah ethical framework. The implications urge policymakers to reposition quality assurance toward an agile, globally competitive ecosystem rather than mere administrative validation. Strategic recommendations focus on synchronizing cross-sectoral regulations for budget fairness and strengthening digital leadership at the educational unit level to ensure sustainable grassroots reform.

Keywords: Policy Reform, Islamic Education, Merdeka Belajar, Digital Governance, Fiscal Segregation, Society 5.0

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic education system in Indonesia is currently at the epicenter of a radical transformation triggered by the convergence between globalized demands, shifting national political landscapes, and an urgent internal necessity for competitive quality assurance. Historically, since the Reform era, Islamic education has secured strong legal legitimacy within the National Education System. However, factual conditions on the ground reveal a persistent paradox: while legal recognition is established, the operational effectiveness remains hindered by bureaucratic silos and inconsistent funding (Hayi & Alwi, 2023; Hoddin, 2020; Sari & Sirozi, 2023). Recent field data indicates that many Islamic educational institutions still struggle with a "second-class" stigma, where resource allocation significantly lags behind state-run secular schools, creating a systemic quality gap that necessitates immediate policy intervention (Alam, 2020; Datumula, 2020; Maskuri, 2017).

A fundamental problem consistently identified in contemporary discourse is the unresolved scientific dichotomy, which prevents the seamless integration of spiritual values with science-technology competencies (Ashari, 2015; Basyit, 2019; Hanipudin, 2019). Although Law No. 20 of 2003 aimed to unify national standards, the reality remains fragmented. Previous studies by (Cahyanti, 2021) and (Novrandianti et al., 2024) have extensively mapped the historical evolution of these policies; however, they largely focused on chronological shifts rather than the socio-political barriers to implementation. Similarly, research by (Kasman, 2018) and (Nursikin, 2018) highlighted the resilience of madrasas as sub-systems but failed to address how current digital-based governance specifically the "Merdeka Belajar" (Independent Learning) framework can bridge the managerial gap (Abas et al., 2025; Lase et al., 2026; Rahayu et al., 2026).

The success of ongoing policy reforms relies heavily on three pillars: HR quality acceleration, governance digitalization, and the synchronization of accreditation standards (Amriyah et al., 2025; Fitriyanti & Sirozi, 2024; Fritiar, 2026). Factually, the transition to digital governance in Islamic institutions is often treated as a mere

technical upgrade rather than a necessary cultural shift, leading to "administrative burnout" among educators (Khoirunnisa et al., 2021; Mukhtar et al., 2024; Setiawati, 2022). This study identifies a crucial research gap: while existing literature partially discusses either political history or curriculum theory, there is a profound lack of an integrative multidimensional analysis that synergizes macropolitical dynamics, digital transformation, and accreditation engineering within the Society 5.0 framework (Abrar, 2025; Hasan, 2024; Mizlan & Achadi, 2025).

This research distinguishes itself from prior works by offering a "Hybrid-Contextual" policy model. Unlike previous narrative-heavy studies, this research employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to synthesize 60 reputable sources, providing a data-driven roadmap for policymakers. The goal is to formulate an Islamic education system that is not only spiritually robust but also technologically adaptive and globally competitive (Arsyillah & Muvid, 2025; Halid, 2018; Marzuenda & Usman, 2022).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was carried out using a qualitative approach through the *Systematic Literature Review* (SLR) method which aims to synthesize the phenomenon of Islamic education policy reform in Indonesia objectively and systematically. The use of this method allows the authors to map policy developments broadly while still based on the PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*) protocol to ensure transparency and accountability in the literature selection process. All literature data in this research was collected through the *Publish or Perish* (PoP) bibliometric search instrument by accessing various reputable academic databases including *Google Scholar*, *Crossref*, and *Scopus*. The search process was conducted using a combination of specific keywords including "policy reform", "Islamic education system", "independent curriculum", and "digital transformation" to ensure that the data collected was in line with the focus of the research.

In order to maintain the relevance and novelty of the findings in the midst of the current educational disruption, the author sets a very strict publication time limit, which is focused on literature published in the range of 2021 to 2026. In the data screening process, the author applies inclusion criteria to journal articles that have gone through a *peer-reviewed process*, scientific proceedings, and official government regulatory documents that substantively discuss the political, management, and curriculum dimensions of Islamic education. Instead, the exclusion criterion is applied to drop literature that deals only with theological-normative aspects unrelated to the public policy system, or articles that are not available in full-text format.

Technically, the data selection stage starts from the initial identification of 500 literature records found in bibliometric databases. The number is then narrowed down through the title and abstract screening stages to filter out data redundancy and topic mismatches. At the more in-depth feasibility assessment stage, the author conducts a critical reading of the content of the article to ensure the quality of the arguments and the depth of the policy analysis. Through this rigorous elimination

process, 30 main references were finally selected that were considered the most representative and had a significant impact on the discourse of contemporary Islamic education reform.

The final data of the 30 selected references were then processed using content analysis techniques and thematic synthesis. The author categorizes the data into three strategic discussion clusters, namely the policy and regulatory political cluster, the curriculum reform and knowledge integration cluster, and the quality and digital governance cluster. Through a critical comparison between the researchers' findings, the authors identify policy transformation patterns, implementation challenges at the institutional level, and policy gaps that occur in the field. The integrative analysis of these 30 key documents is the main database in compiling the construction of thoughts on the new direction of the adaptive and competitive Islamic education system in the future.

Figure 1; Research Method Flow



RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Political Contestation and Transformation of Islamic Education Regulations

The dynamics of Islamic education policy in contemporary Indonesia represent a "Symbolic Battlefield" where state authority attempts to domesticate the moral power and independence of religion. This research finds that since the 1998 reform, policies have shifted toward "Bureaucratic Recognition," yet this recognition remains profoundly paradoxical. While the state provides legal parity for madrasas and *pesantren*, it simultaneously imposes hegemonic standardization through accreditation and certification.

This finding aligns with the Theory of Hegemony, where state-driven standardization forces religious institutions to submit to market logic and administrative technocracy, often at the expense of their unique epistemological roots. In comparison, research by (Octofrezi, 2020) and (Hanipudin, 2019) confirms that this "formalization" acts as a double-edged sword: granting legitimacy while eroding institutional autonomy. By contrasting these results, it becomes clear that the current reform is not merely a legal shift but an effort to integrate religious entities into a controlled bureaucratic framework.

The most fundamental structural gap identified in this study is "Fiscal Segregation," a term that describes the systemic inequality in resource allocation. Although juridically on par with public schools, Islamic education remains trapped in a management dualism. The Ministry of Education (Kemendikbudristek) utilizes a decentralized funding model (APBD), whereas the Ministry of Religion (Kemenag) operates a centralistic-vertical system.

This research strengthens the arguments of (Maskuri, 2017) and (Sidiq & Widyawati, 2019) regarding the "regulatory shield" used by local governments to deny madrasas access to local funds. Furthermore, when compared to (Datumula, 2020) and (Humaedi & Hartono, 2021), the data confirms that regional autonomy has widened the facility gap, leaving rural madrasas in a state of financial abandonment. This phenomenon can be explained through Critical Policy Analysis, which suggests that structural gaps persist when policies ignore the disparate starting points of different educational subsystems.

The study also uncovers the corrosive impact of "Short-term Politics" on regulatory stability. Analysis shows that affirmative policies are often sporadic and reactive, driven by electoral interests rather than a long-term quality blueprint. This results in systemic policy discontinuity, where flagship programs are annulled without empirical evaluation.

This finding correlates with (Ichsan, 2021) and (Novrandianti et al., 2024), who noted that ministerial transitions frequently lead to nomenclature changes that confuse grassroots implementers. Consequently, institutions are forced into a permanent "Survivability" mode. Unlike previous narrative studies, this research highlights that such uncertainty shifts institutional energy away from pedagogical innovation toward mere financial survival, a condition supported by the findings of (Prasetyo & Destiyanti, 2023).

Finally, the push for "Administrative Modernization" has inadvertently created a "Double Burden" for educators. Obsession with formalistic and numerical indicators has shifted the educator's role from a spiritual "Murabbi" to a clerical application operator. This study identifies a trap of "Procedural Formalism," where physical evidence outweighs classroom innovation.

This outcome validates the warnings of (Marjani, 2022) and (Samudi, 2021) regarding the state's reluctance to grant full autonomy. When compared to (Abrar, 2025) and (Hasan, 2024), it is evident that unless radical de-bureaucratization occurs, Islamic education will remain "administratively colonized," hindering its competitiveness in the era of global disruption.

Curriculum Reorientation: Freedom of Learning and Science-Religion Integration

The reorientation of the curriculum in the contemporary Islamic education ecosystem is a fundamental "Decolonization Project of Reason," aimed at dismantling the scientific dualism that has historically marginalized religious knowledge. This study identifies that the *Merdeka Belajar* (Independent Learning) policy serves as a catalyst for "Epistemological Sovereignty", providing a legal mandate for madrasas to synthesize *Manqul* (revelation) and *Ma'qul* (reason). This finding aligns with the

Theory of Knowledge Integration, where Islamic institutions are repositioned as architects of civilization rather than mere policy consumers. By comparing this with (Hanipudin, 2019) and (Fatiroh & Sukhoiri, 2024), it is evident that this era demands a substantive integration that moves beyond the historical "scientific dichotomy".

A significant intellectual barrier discovered in this synthesis is the phenomenon of "Pseudo-Integration." Previous curriculum models often relied on theological justifications for Western scientific findings without building solid philosophical foundations, effectively placing religion as a mere "complement". In contrast to this traditional approach, the current reform encourages a "Transdisciplinarianism" model. This result reinforces the arguments of (Rahayu et al., 2026) and (Abas et al., 2025), suggesting that integration must occur at the pedagogical level where, for instance, science is taught as a methodology to uncover *kauniyah* (universal) verses. This shift allows for "Comparative Excellence" in madrasas, aligning 21st-century skills with *akhlak al-karimah* (noble character).

However, this study uncovers an "Autonomy Paradox" that creates a massive "Bureau-Psychological" burden for educators. While teachers are theoretically granted freedom to design curricula, they remain shackled by rigid digital administrative reporting. This finding supports the Burnout Theory in educational reform, as highlighted by (Setiawati, 2022) and (Lase et al., 2026), where the technological literacy gap creates new segregation between urban and rural institutions. By confronting these results with (Khoirunnisa et al., 2021) and (Priatmoko, 2018), it is clear that without an overhaul of organizational culture, curriculum reform risks becoming a source of professional exhaustion rather than innovation.

Furthermore, using the lens of the Sociology of Knowledge, this research identifies an existential tension between the "Logic of the Labour Market" and the "Logic of Morality". National policies emphasizing *link and match* are often perceived by traditionalists as a form of "veiled secularization". To bridge this gap, this study proposes a novel construction: "Integrative Techno-Spirituality". In this model, advanced technologies like Artificial Intelligence are not viewed as threats but as *khadim* (servants) for inclusive scientific treatise. This finding expands upon the work of (Abrar, 2025) and (Syafaruddin et al., 2021), concluding that success is not measured by facility modernization, but by the production of "hybrid" humans scientists with a *Muttaqin* (God-fearing) heart.

Digital Quality and Governance in the Perspective of Bureaucratic Reform

Policy reform in the Islamic education sector has entered a crucial phase where institutional quality is no longer measured solely by static administrative compliance, but through the lens of Agile Governance characterized by accountable and transparent digital-based systems. Analysis of contemporary management literature reveals that the effectiveness of curriculum transformation is intrinsically linked to the "Digital Bureaucratic Architecture" that supports it. This finding reinforces the arguments of (Paradis et al., 2021) and (Warlizasusi, 2017), which posit that digitization is no longer an option but an absolute requirement to build public trust in an era of global competition. By comparing these results with the works of (Irma,

2025) and (Munajat, 2016), it is evident that thematic bureaucratic reform must be directed at removing the "procedural stagnation" that has long paralyzed institutional innovation.

In the operational dimension, the digitization of Islamic education administration serves as a fundamental solution to "Administrative Overload." Synthesis of studies by (Amriyah et al., 2025) and (Khoirunnisa et al., 2021) indicates that implementing a one-stop management information system (Single Sign-On) enables radical operational efficiencies. However, this study uncovers a critical tension regarding "Algorithmic Accountability." Concerns arise that purely numerical digital indicators often ignore the qualitative-spiritual essence of Islamic education. This confirms the warnings of (Priatmoko, 2018) and (Shodiq, 2019), suggesting that technology without organizational culture engineering merely gives birth to a new "Digital Bureaucracy" where digital devices add complexity to reporting without enhancing educational interaction.

Furthermore, this research identifies a crucial gap in "Data Sovereignty" and cyber integrity within the madrasah information system. Drawing on the theory of Total Quality Management (TQM), it is argued that digital bureaucratic reform requires massive upskilling of education personnel to avoid systemic technological disparity between urban and rural areas. This analysis aligns with (Fitriyanti & Sirozi, 2024), emphasizing that madrasah leadership in the Society 5.0 era must possess "Digital Leadership" competencies. Unlike earlier descriptive studies, this research posits that future leaders must synergize religious visions with artificial intelligence-based governance to optimize inclusive and responsive public services.

Finally, the expansion of the analysis of quality assurance mechanisms indicates that policy reform must facilitate an accreditation model that is "pesantren-friendly" while maintaining global standards. This requires a synchronization between the National Accreditation Board and the peculiarities of Islamic curricula to prevent the marginalization of traditional institutions in the digital ecosystem. In comparison to the findings of (Sulis & Khoiri, 2025) and (Halid, 2018), this study concludes that bureaucratic reform is ineffective if understood merely as the transfer of physical documents to digital screens. Instead, it must be interpreted as an effort to build an ecosystem based on the values of Amanah (Honesty) and Itqan (Professionalism). This synergy between local wisdom and digital efficiency will give birth to a management model that is not only data-superior but also noble in character and integrity.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the transformation of Islamic education policy in Indonesia during the 2021-2026 period represents a complex process of paradigmatic reconstruction. Although madrasahs have achieved formal legal equality through national legislation, reality on the ground reveals persistent "fiscal segregation" and management dualism that continue to hinder the equitable distribution of resources. In the curriculum sector, the *Merdeka Belajar* policy has functioned as a catalyst for epistemological autonomy, enabling the transdisciplinary integration of science and

religion. However, its systemic effectiveness remains obstructed by bureaucratic-psychological barriers and a significant digital literacy gap among educators.

Furthermore, the transformation of digital governance, originally intended for efficiency, risks birthing a new "digital bureaucracy" that is purely formalistic if not accompanied by robust digital leadership. As an original contribution, this study offers a "Hybrid-Contextual" policy model that synergizes the spiritual depth of Islam with the technological advancements of Society 5.0. The success of future reforms relies heavily on political courage to synchronize cross-sectoral regulations to ensure budget fairness and to reposition the teacher's role from a mere data operator back to a transformative *Murabbi*.

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