

# Government and Pesantren: The Dilemma of Formalization and Informalization in Islamic Education in Indonesia

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the conceptual and practical tensions between government formal policies and the informal character of pesantren in the transformation of Islamic education in Indonesia. Although Law No. 18 of 2019 provides formal legitimacy for pesantren, the relationship between the government and pesantren does not operate linearly. Formalization through standardized curricula, accreditation, competency certification, and administrative obligations has created new dynamics within pesantren, which were previously based on non-bureaucratic traditions such as sorogan, bandongan, and halaqah. Many pesantren respond to these policies through adaptive strategies: accepting certain aspects of formalization to gain legitimacy and funding, while maintaining informal structures as the core of their identity. This research employs a qualitative approach, including document analysis, in-depth interviews, and participatory observation in both salafiyah and khalafiyah pesantren. The findings indicate that the formalization-informalization dilemma is a dialectical process involving adaptation, resistance, and compromise. The study underscores that the sustainability of pesantren depends on their ability to develop a hybrid education model that accommodates the demands of modernity without compromising foundational traditions.

## INTRODUCTION

Pesantren are among the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, developing through informal patterns of knowledge transmission rooted in *kia*, *santri* relations, ritual habituation, and intellectual traditions such as *sorogan*, *bandongan*, and *halaqah* (Saini, 2024). At the same time, the social and political transformation of the national education system has drawn pesantren into the stream of formalization through state regulation, particularly following the enactment of Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren, which positions pesantren not only as religious and social institutions but also as educational institutions possessing formal legitimacy equivalent to other state-recognized schools (Fahham, 2015; Mustofa, 2023). These epistemological tensions raise fundamental questions about how pesantren negotiate their institutional identity amid the state's growing inclination to

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place educational institutions within a uniform regulatory structure.

Building on this context, the present study formulates three central research questions: first, how national education policies drive the formalization of pesantren; second, how pesantren respond to these pressures through strategies of adaptation, resistance, or reinforcement of informalization; and third, to what extent the dialectic between formalization and informalization shapes new patterns in pesantren educational practices. To address these questions, this study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design involving several *salafiyah* and *khalafiyah* pesantren (Engkizar et al., 2024; Engkizar et al., 2025; Yusnita et al., 2018). Data were collected through policy document analysis and participatory observation of formal, non-formal, and informal learning activities within pesantren, following approaches used in contemporary research on pesantren transformation (Muchasan, 2024). Data analysis was conducted through reduction, categorization, and thematic interpretation, drawing on theoretical frameworks from the sociology of education, state–religion relations, and institutional hybridization (Dewi, 2015).

Previous research on pesantren education generally centers on three major strands. First, studies on state-driven formalization argue that regulations such as the 2019 Pesantren Law promote curriculum standardization, accreditation, and certification, which may enhance institutional legitimacy but risk eroding the traditional flexibility of pesantren (Htay et al., 2025; Jaafar et al., 2025). Second, classical anthropological studies by Fauzi & Muali (2018); Murtaufiq & Ahmad (2019); Zulmuqim (2017) highlight that the strength of pesantren lies in informal and non-formal traditions such as *sorogan*, *bandongan*, and character formation through close personal relations between kiai and santri. Third, contemporary research on pesantren modernization (Lukens-Bull, 2019; Zarkasyi, 2020; Mustofa et al., 2023) identifies the emergence of hybrid models that integrate national curricula with classical Islamic scholarship, although many of these studies remain descriptive and do not explore in depth the dynamics of power negotiation between the state and pesantren. Overall, earlier studies tend to separate discussions on policy and tradition, resulting in a limited understanding of how state formalization and pesantren informalization interact dialectically in everyday educational practices and institutional governance (Akhmad, 2024).

This study contributes to the academic discourse on the relationship between formal, non-formal, and informal education by demonstrating that pesantren are not passive recipients of state policy; rather, they act as agents who actively negotiate their institutional autonomy. The findings enrich the understanding of how traditional institutions can transform without losing their epistemological character, while also offering new perspectives on hybrid educational models that integrate formal structures with the long-standing informal practices that constitute the core strength of pesantren (Mustofa et al., 2023; Saini, 2024). Thus, this study not only expands the discourse on the modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia but also provides theoretical contributions to institutional studies examining the adaptive processes of traditional institutions within modern state regulatory frameworks.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the dialectical dynamics between formalization and informalization within pesantren educational practices (Engkizar et al., 2023; Kassymova et al., 2025). A qualitative approach was chosen because it is capable of capturing the complexity of meanings, experiences, and negotiations undertaken by educational actors, as recommended by Akem et al (2025); Akyuni et al (2025); Rambe et al (2025) in contextual and interpretive social research. Data were collected through two primary techniques: analysis of policy documents related to pesantren

education and participatory observation of formal, non-formal, and informal learning activities within the pesantren. A data triangulation strategy was applied to ensure the credibility and dependability of the findings, following Patton's (2015) recommendations. The collected data were then analyzed using Braun & Clarke, (2019); Johar et al (2024) thematic analysis framework, which involves processes of coding, categorization, and interpretation to identify patterns of dialectics between state regulation and traditional pesantren practices. The validity of the findings was strengthened through member checking and the application of an audit trail, as suggested by (Braun & Steiger, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2023; Terry et al., 2017). Through this methodological framework, the study aims to provide a holistic account of how pesantren negotiate pressures of formalization within the broader context of national educational policy changes.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The discourse on the relationship between the state and pesantren within the broader context of educational modernization in Indonesia is often constrained by the dichotomy of formalization–informalization. The narrative of formalization positions pesantren as objects of state regulation, while the narrative of informalization emphasizes their autonomy as guardians of tradition. The findings of this study indicate that this relationship is far more complex and dynamic. Pesantren are not passive entities but active actors that negotiate their own space of autonomy. Negotiation occurs not only at the structural level such as accreditation, teacher certification, and curriculum integration but also at the epistemological level, involving debates on the validity, production, and legitimacy of religious knowledge (Fitria, 2025; Hidayatulloh et al., 2023).

The strategies adopted by pesantren can be understood as a form of *selective appropriation*, a process of choosing elements of modernization that are considered beneficial without sacrificing the epistemological core of tradition. In practice, pesantren adopt accreditation, general curricula, and modern governance because of their pragmatic value, yet continue to maintain the authority of the *kiai*, the study of *kitab kuning*, the *bandongan–sorogan* methods, and the distinctive habitus of pesantren as primary sources of legitimacy (Fauzi & Muali, 2018; Zulmuqim, 2017). This phenomenon parallels the theory of hybridization Bhatia & Bhabha (2017); Sabri (2020); Weber (2023), which explains how traditional institutions respond to modernity by forming new configurations that are neither entirely traditional nor fully modern.

Empirical examples reinforce these findings. Pesantren such as Al-Mukmin Ngruki, Gontor, and Lirboyo exhibit similar patterns: they establish accredited formal schools while simultaneously maintaining traditional epistemic structures (Hefner, 2016; Sasmita et al., 2023). In these cases, the state provides an administrative framework such as diplomas and accreditation but epistemological processes remain firmly under pesantren authority through chains of scholarly transmission (*sanad*) and traditional pedagogical practices.

Epistemological dynamics become even more evident in the implementation of *Imtihan Wathani* as a replacement for the National Examination for *Pendidikan Diniyah Formal* (PDF). Normatively, this examination is claimed to be aligned with pesantren characteristics, yet in practice it still follows the centralized standards of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This condition shows that the state continues to maintain bureaucratic control and a singular definition of educational quality (Hilmin et al., 2022). The standardization of examination formats reflects a modernist epistemic bias in which quality is measured through quantitative indicators, whereas pesantren assess success through moral character, *adab*, and depth of understanding elements that are not easily quantified (Jaafar et al., 2025; Okenova et al., 2025).

Critiques of state standards align with various modern educational theories. The concept of the hidden curriculum demonstrates that standardization carries bureaucratic values that may shift the spiritual orientation of pesantren; Freire's (2005) critical pedagogy asserts that centralized evaluation models reinforce one-directional power relations; Bronfenbrenner's (1976) ecology of education theory explains that macrosystem interventions by the state may disrupt the micro-level educational ecosystem of pesantren; while Gardner's multiple intelligences theory shows that exam-based assessments cannot capture the diverse intelligences of students, particularly moral spiritual intelligence which is central to pesantren education (Jackson, 2018).

Thus, the findings of this study affirm that the relationship between the state and pesantren is not a binary opposition but a process of negotiation that produces hybrid forms. Pesantren are able to maintain their epistemological identity while strategically utilizing state modernization instruments. This relationship results in a distinctly Indonesian educational model that is moderate, adaptive, and grounded in tradition, while also challenging global paradigms of standardization and technocratic quality assurance (Abdalla, 2022; Bashori, 2017; Lubis & Ok, 2024; Sahlberg, 2022). These findings suggest the need for a more pluralistic, dialogical, and context-sensitive model of educational evaluation so that modernization does not erode the fundamental mission of pesantren as institutions for character and spiritual formation (Zarkasyi, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The dynamics between the state and pesantren cannot be understood merely through a dichotomy of subordination or domination; rather, they must be read as a process of hybridization that unfolds through epistemological negotiation, structural adaptation, and symbolic contestation. The findings of this study show that although the state through the Ministry of Religious Affairs implements standardization policies such as *Imtihan Wathani*, pesantren are not positioned as passive recipients. On the contrary, they reconstruct these policies in accordance with their own habitus, values, and symbolic capital. This process demonstrates that pesantren are able to maintain their epistemological and cultural identity while simultaneously responding to the formal demands of the state.

Theoretically, this study expands the discourse on educational hybridization by emphasizing that hybridity does not only occur at the level of curriculum or institutional arrangements but also within the epistemic domain namely, how knowledge is produced, evaluated, and legitimized through the interaction between the state and religious institutions. The practical implications of these findings indicate that the government needs to design educational regulations that are dialogical, participatory, and sensitive to the diversity of Islamic educational systems in Indonesia. Regulations that are overly homogeneous risk weakening the unique pedagogical characteristics of pesantren, even though such diversity constitutes an important asset within the national educational ecosystem. A more open and flexible policy approach would enable pesantren to play a strategic role not only as custodians of Islamic scholarly tradition but also as constructive partners in shaping a national education system that is inclusive, adaptive, and responsive to the cultural and religious diversity of Indonesian society.

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