

# GOVERNING FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS IN PESANTREN, MADRASAH AND ISLAMIC SCHOOLS IN INDONESIA

*Tadbir Urus Keimanan dan Ilmu: Kajian Perbandingan tentang Kepimpinan, Pengurusan dan Dinamik Institusi di Pesantren, Madrasah dan Sekolah Islam di Indonesia*

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**ABSTRACT** - This comparative study examines leadership and management practices across three major types of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia: pesantren (non-formal Islamic boarding schools), madrasah (formal Islamic schools under the Ministry of Religious Affairs), and Islamic schools (under the Ministry of Education). This study aims to identify how institutional form shapes leadership style, governance, curriculum integration, and responses to contemporary challenges. Drawing on historical and institutional analyses, program documents, and case studies, the research develops a typology of leadership orientations (traditional charismatic, bureaucratic/instrumental, and hybrid & transformational). It links these to management mechanisms (decision-making, governance, resource mobilisation, teacher development, and quality assurance). The study finds that pesantren leadership remains highly relational and custodial (centered on the kyai's moral authority and community embeddedness), supporting spiritual formation but facing capacity limits in formal management and scaling. Madrasah leaders navigate dual accountability to religious communities and national education authorities, resulting in hybrid administrative practices and a stronger orientation to standardised curricula and teacher professionalisation. Islamic school leadership combines academic governance with state accreditation demands, increasingly adopting managerial and strategic approaches but struggling with identity tensions between faith commitments and educational modernisation. The paper concludes with policy and practice recommendations for strengthening leadership development, quality assurance, and cross-sector learning while preserving distinctive religious missions. Implications are drawn for policymakers, institutional leaders, and researchers seeking to harmonise tradition and modernity in Islamic education.

**ABSTRAK** - Kajian perbandingan ini meneliti amalan kepimpinan dan pengurusan dalam tiga jenis utama institusi pendidikan Islam di Indonesia, iaitu pesantren (institusi pendidikan Islam berasrama bukan formal), madrasah (sekolah Islam formal di bawah Kementerian Agama), dan sekolah Islam (di bawah Kementerian Pendidikan). Kajian ini bertujuan mengenal pasti bagaimana bentuk institusi mempengaruhi gaya kepimpinan, tadbir urus,

integrasi kurikulum dan tindak balas terhadap cabaran semasa. Dengan menggunakan analisis sejarah dan institusi, dokumen program serta kajian kes, penyelidikan ini membangunkan tipologi orientasi kepimpinan yang merangkumi kepimpinan karismatik tradisional, birokratik/instrumental, dan hibrid serta transformasional. Orientasi ini dikaitkan dengan mekanisme pengurusan seperti proses membuat keputusan, tadbir urus, mobilisasi sumber, pembangunan guru dan jaminan kualiti. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kepimpinan pesantren kekal bersifat hubungan sosial yang erat dan penjagaan amanah, berpusat pada autoriti moral kyai serta keterikatan dengan komuniti. Pendekatan ini menyokong pembentukan kerohanian, namun berhadapan dengan kekangan kapasiti dalam pengurusan formal dan pengembangan institusi. Pemimpin madrasah pula perlu mengimbangi akauntabiliti kepada komuniti agama dan pihak berkuasa pendidikan negara, sekali gus menghasilkan amalan pentadbiran hibrid yang lebih berorientasikan kurikulum piawai dan profesionalisme guru. Sementara itu, kepimpinan sekolah Islam menggabungkan tadbir urus akademik dengan tuntutan akreditasi kerajaan serta semakin mengamalkan pendekatan pengurusan dan strategi yang lebih sistematik, namun berdepan ketegangan identiti antara komitmen keagamaan dan pemodenan pendidikan. Kajian ini mencadangkan penambahbaikan dalam pembangunan kepimpinan, jaminan kualiti dan pembelajaran rentas sektor sambil mengekalkan misi keagamaan yang tersendiri. Implikasi kajian adalah signifikan kepada pembuat dasar, pemimpin institusi dan penyelidik yang berusaha mengharmonikan tradisi dan modeniti dalam pendidikan Islam.

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's Islamic educational landscape is diverse and historically rich. According to Indonesia's Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS, 2020), Indonesia is a populous Muslim-majority country (about 87% Muslim of 270 million citizens). Indonesia has long integrated religious and "secular" learning, encompassing traditional pesantren (Islamic Boarding Schools), formal madrasah, modern Integrated Islamic Schools (*Sekolah Islam Terpadu*), Christian schools, and national schools. These institutions strive to balance religious instruction with "secular" learning, yet operate under different governance structures and cultural contexts. Islamic schools aim not only for academic excellence but also for character and faith formation (Utari et al., 2025). However, their management and leadership models face unique challenges in aligning with government regulations while upholding Islamic values. For example, Indonesian Islamic schools are subject to "dichotomous control" by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC). Pesantren and madrasah generally fall under MoRA, whereas many Islamic schools (including SIT) are regulated by MoEC, resulting in fragmented oversight (Hasanah, 2021; Yarrow et al., 2020).

Despite this split governance, every formal school must integrate the national curricula (Kurikulum 2013 K-13, or Kurikulum Merdeka) and address modern issues such as digitalisation and competition from other formal national schools. Prior studies highlight that management and leadership critically shape the quality of Islamic schools, yet little comparative research exists among these three school models. This study aims to fill that gap by examining and contrasting leadership styles, governance structures, curriculum models, and strategic responses in pesantren, madrasah, and Islamic schools in Indonesia. Using a qualitative, historical, and institutional analysis approach, we analyse how faith and knowledge are governed in each setting, and how these institutions navigate contemporary challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1 Faith and Knowledge in Islamic Perspective

Islamic tradition fundamentally values *'ilm* (knowledge) and links it inseparably with *iman* (faith). The Qur'an and Hadith repeatedly emphasise the pursuit of knowledge, implying that spiritual and worldly understanding complement each other. The Qur'an and Prophetic teachings emphasise that education must cultivate both understanding and moral virtue. For example, the Qur'an states that the Prophet Muhammad was sent "to perfect noble character" (Qur'an 68:4), indicating that moral education is central to learning (Siregar et al., 2025). Modern Islamic educators emphasise that religious education

should not be isolated from general sciences, as both are necessary to produce intellectually capable and morally upright individuals (Amin, 2014; Utari et al., 2025). In contemporary Indonesia, this principle underlies efforts to integrate *tawhidic* (monotheistic) paradigms into schooling. Historically, classical Islamic civilisation exemplified this integration. Scholars such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Khaldun taught religion alongside philosophy, medicine, and other sciences within a single holistic curriculum. In other words, the Islamic worldview does not recognise a rigid dichotomy between faith-based knowledge and secular knowledge (Amin, 2014; Utari et al., 2025).

Contemporary Islamic educators echo this holistic view. Siregar et.al. (2025) observed that the goal of Islamic education is to develop balanced individuals whose cognitive, emotional, and spiritual faculties are in harmony, with morality as the guiding principle. In practice, *pesantren*, madrasah, and Islamic Schools in Indonesia draw on this tradition. Today, many Indonesian Islamic schools seek to revive this integration. The rise of Islamic Schools and Integrated Islamic Schools or *Sekolah Islam Terpadu* (SIT) responds to concerns that national and secular schools neglect spiritual values. SIT explicitly aims to harmonize general and religious curricula in a holistic system (Nurfaisal et al., 2024; Raafi, 2020; Utari et al., 2025). Madrasahs similarly address this concern by combining their religious curriculum from the MoRA with the national curriculum of the MoEC while maintaining traditional values. Meanwhile, *pesantren* are slowly modernising by adopting a dual education system, allowing their santri (students) to pursue formal education during the day and *pesantren* education at night, while remaining consistent in their traditional values.

At the same time, the Islamic education system must adapt to contemporary realities. There is broad consensus that education should not only be a process of transferring knowledge but also of shaping character and competencies for the 21st century (Utari et al., 2025). Indonesian scholars argue that integrating STEM and technology in Islamic schooling, promoting critical thinking within an ethical framework, and fostering lifelong learning are essential strategies in staying relevant. In summary, the philosophical foundation of this study is that faith and knowledge are mutually reinforcing in Islam. Any leadership or governance model in *pesantren*, madrasah, Islamic schools or SIT will thus be judged by how well it promotes both religious values and high-quality modern education, reflecting Islam's holistic educational vision (Hasanah, 2021; Nurfaisal et al., 2024; Utari et al., 2025).

## 2.2 Islamic Education Landscape

Islamic education in Indonesia has deep roots dating back several centuries. After Islam arrived in the archipelago around the 13th-15th centuries, early instruction took place informally in mosques and teacher-student study circles. The *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) emerged as the oldest formal institution and became the cornerstone of Islamic learning by the 15th century. Traditional *pesantren* curricula focused on the *Qur'an*, *Hadith* (Prophetic traditions), Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*aqidah*), and Sufism (*tasawwuf*). Instruction was often by rote memorisation in Arabic and guided by a *kyai* (scholar-leader), whose spiritual authority shaped the school community (Dhofier, 1999).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, madrasahs were introduced as part of a broader modernisation movement. Influenced by reforms in the Ottoman Empire and South Asia, madrasahs added secular subjects (math, science, languages) to their curricula alongside religious studies. Organisations like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) played pivotal roles: Muhammadiyah championed Western-style education alongside faith, while NU preserved traditional *pesantren* values within its madrasahs. After independence (post-1945), the Indonesian government integrated madrasahs into the national system. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) standardised curricula to ensure parity with secular schools (Tayeb, 2018). Governments also urged *pesantren* to modernise by adding general subjects and teacher training, aiming to improve outcomes and employability.

More recently, private Islamic Schools, or Integrated Islamic Schools (SIT), have proliferated as institutions under the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC), as parents seek institutions that combine academic rigour with religious character-building (Utari et al., 2025). Research consistently emphasises that the quality of any school depends on its leadership, management, and institutional environment. In Islamic schools, this dual mandate (national and religious standards) makes leadership especially pivotal. Effective principals and *kyai* (*pesantren* leaders) guide policy decisions on curriculum integration, teacher training, and community engagement, and hence shape school outcomes (Alam, 2018).

### 2.3 Quality Factors and Challenges

Recent literature highlights several challenges facing Islamic education in Indonesia (Antoni et al., 2025; Daulay & Pulungan, 2024). One is quality and competitiveness. There is a quality gap where Islamic institutions have grown in number but often lag in resources and outcomes. Cultural factors (resistance to change, emphasis on tradition) and institutional factors (underfunding, limited teacher quality, weak strategic planning) contribute to Islamic schools' struggles in the competitive education marketplace. Yet empirical studies present a complex picture: for example, Madrasah students in some regions outperform their peers in secular schools on English literacy tests, suggesting that with effective leadership and pedagogy, Islamic schools can excel academically (Nawas, 2023).

Another challenge is modernisation. Globalisation, technology, and new pedagogies are pressuring Islamic schools to update their teaching methods and curricula. Policy and studies note a push to integrate digital literacy, critical thinking, and vocational skills in pesantrens and madrasahs. However, traditional institutions worry about preserving core values amid change. Survey data from madrasah leaders show efforts to incorporate technology into classrooms, with one principal successfully securing laptops and internet access to improve learning, indicating a shift toward 21st-century education (Kultsum, 2020).

Finally, organisational management is a cross-cutting challenge. The literature emphasises the need for stronger school-based management and strategic planning in Islamic schools. Issues such as unclear roles, poor communication, and inadequate use of data are cited as obstacles (Supriadi et al., 2025). Addressing these will require capacity building, such as targeted leadership development, enhanced accountability systems, and institutional learning (e.g., cross-sector forums or accreditation) to raise quality while respecting the Islamic ethos.

These issues illustrate the tensions leaders face. For example, preserving strong moral character while introducing digital tools, or enforcing standardised curricula while respecting religious traditions. Addressing such challenges requires adaptive management. Strategies such as STEM education, technology integration, promotion of entrepreneurship, ethical leadership training, and school-industry partnerships have been proposed to keep Islamic education relevant and competitive.

### 2.4 Duality of Governance and Institutional Context

The institutional framework of Indonesian Islamic schools is marked by a division of branches between MoRA and MoEC. Historically, MoRA has overseen madrasah (and religious instruction in public schools), whereas MoEC governs national secular public and private schools. Research shows that this split has led to a "dichotomous control" of Islamic education. On one side, traditional pesantren often remain outside government structures entirely, relying on community support and *waqf*. On the other hand, modern madrasahs are formally part of the national system but subject to MoRA regulations (Tayeb, 2018). For instance, madrasahs use the national curriculum plus mandated Islamic subjects (about 30% of total content), and must implement Madrasah-Based Management (MBM) as required by MoEC (Hasanah, 2021).

This arrangement places formal Islamic schools under considerable structural constraints. As a result, studies note that Indonesian Islamic schools have become "much more autonomous" than before, yet still "have lower recognition by the state and society" than their Malaysian counterparts (Tayeb, 2018). In practice, madrasahs and pesantren are largely self-regulating in their daily affairs but struggle with inconsistent funding and accreditation. Integrated Islamic Schools (SIT), which often register with MoEC as private schools, enjoy greater curricular autonomy but also bear full responsibility for aligning with national standards.

### 2.5 Leadership Models in Islamic Schools

Leadership in these institutions takes diverse forms. In pesantren, the *kyai* typically serves as the founder, spiritual guide, and chief administrator (Alam, 2018). The *kyai*'s authority derives from scholarship and community reverence, making the leadership inherently charismatic and traditional. Research describes *kyai* leadership as a blend of rational and traditional styles, which is pragmatic in school management but rooted in personal charisma and lineage. A *kyai* performs multiple roles (such as an educator, caregiver, community leader, and manager) requiring adaptability to social changes without compromising religious values (Alam, 2018; Dhofier, 1999).

By contrast, madrasah heads (principals) are professional educators, often government-appointed or certified. Their leadership style can vary widely. Holili et al., (2024) found that even within two adjacent schools, one principal employed a democratic, bottom-up approach, while the other was authoritarian and paternalistic. In general, madrasah leaders must balance bureaucratic duties (compliance with MoRA/MoEC policies) with community expectations. Madrasah leadership theories often draw on transformational or servant leadership paradigms to emphasise moral exemplarity and community engagement.

Integrated Islamic Schools tend to be privately run by foundations or philanthropic organisations. Leadership here often focuses on innovation and competitive standards while maintaining an Islamic ethos. For example, in the prestigious Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG), school leaders describe their model as combining Islamic and modern education to produce open-minded leaders for both religious and worldly success (Fajri & Faizuddin, 2022). Within a *tawhīdic* framework, leaders proactively build capacity through innovative strategies, from implementing blended learning to launching entrepreneurship programs (Fajri & Faizuddin, 2022; Utari et al., 2025).

## 2.6 Curriculum Models (K-13 Implementation)

Indonesia's 2013 Curriculum, or Kurikulum 2013 (K-13), is the latest and most adopted curriculum. It represents Indonesia's competency-based national curriculum that emphasises critical thinking and character. Its rollout affected all school types. In madrasahs and SIT, K-13 is officially used, sometimes supplemented by an independent or institution-specific curriculum. However, A case study in Aceh's Madrasah Aliyah found K-13 to be "not effective" due to insufficient instructional time and heavy administrative workload for teachers (Erizar et al., 2021; Thusrina & Rusdi, 2024). Excessive documentation was cited as the biggest problem. This suggests that even secular reforms can strain religious schools, which often have larger class sizes or less teacher training. Many pesantren, meanwhile, adopt K-13 selectively or focus on competency principles while maintaining religious routines. Some "modern pesantren" align with K-13 in their formal school sections, but also run parallel Islamic classes (the *Mu'allimin* system) (Mujib et al., 2021).

## 2.7 Theoretical Foundations

Theoretically, this study draws on organisational and educational leadership theories as they intersect with religious schooling. Weberian analysis of authority helps explain how kyai charisma contrasts with the bureaucratic rationality of public-school principals (Alam, 2018). Constructivist educational theory underpins integrated curriculum models, where knowledge integration fosters learners' holistic development (Utari et al., 2025). Institutional theory highlights how Indonesian Islamic schools navigate dual oversight and policy environments, and how sectoral differences (religious vs. national education bureaucracy) shape practice. Hence, successful leaders in Islamic schools are those who can skilfully adapt their schools' visions to accommodate both their faith-based values and the demands of the national curriculum (Fajri & Faizuddin, 2022).

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study uses a qualitative, comparative case study approach, combining historical and institutional analysis. Our research is based on a thorough review of scholarly articles, official government publications, and real-world case studies of exemplar institutions. The analysis focuses on differences and commonalities in leadership and governance across three categories: (1) Pesantren (traditional Islamic boarding schools), (2) Madrasah (formal schools under MoRA), and (3) Integrated Islamic Schools (SIT) typically under MoEC. Our historical analysis tracks changes in Indonesian education since independence in 1945, including key events like the centralization of madrasah under MoRA and the nationwide rollout of the K-13 curriculum. The institutional analysis examines policies (e.g. national curriculum law, MoRA decrees) and organizational structures. We also incorporate thematic analysis of interview data and field reports from prior studies to identify recurring issues (e.g., leadership styles, curriculum integration, stakeholder relations). By cross-examining these data, we construct a comparative framework (see Table 1) that maps key features for each school type.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study identified distinct leadership and governance profiles in the three school types, as summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Institutional Features of Pesantren, Madrasah, and Integrated Islamic Schools in Indonesia**

Feature	Pesantren	Madrasah	SIT
<b>Governance /Affiliation</b>	Primarily independent; regulated informally by MoRA; minimal MoEC oversight. Often self-financed by waqf, donations, <i>santri</i> fees.	Jurisdiction of Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA). Government-subsidized (state madrasah) or private (but still accredited by MoRA/MoEC). Part of the national system.	Registered as private schools under MoEC; benefit from national curriculum autonomy. Often supported by Islamic foundations (e.g. Muhammadiyah, NU, or independent).
<b>Leadership</b>	Led by Kyai (charismatic religious leader). Leadership is tradition-based and community-oriented. Decisions often influenced by religious values; succession can be familial. Modern pesantren sometimes appoint principals for non-religious management tasks.	Led by formal principals (often with education credentials). Leadership style varies: some democratic/transformational, others authoritarian/paternalistic. Must navigate bureaucratic reporting lines (MoRA, district education offices).	Led by principals or headmasters (often with a vision for Islamic education innovation). Leadership tends to emphasise institutional growth, community engagement, and pedagogical creativity. Boards of trustees may set long-term strategy.
<b>Curriculum &amp; Pedagogy</b>	Primarily classical Islamic curriculum (Kitab Kuning, Quran memorisation). Many (especially "modern" pesantren) integrate general subjects; some adopt K-13 or specialized curriculum alongside religious program. Highly immersive, often after-hours religious mentoring.	Follows the national curriculum plus 30% Islamic subjects (Quran, Fiqh, etc.). Implemented via Madrasah-Based Management (MBM) policies. Teachers are trained for both secular and religious instruction. K-13 introduced blended, competency-based methods, but faced challenges (e.g. time constraints, administrative load).	Combines National Curriculum (K-13/independent) with enriched Islamic curriculum (e.g. Tahfiz, Arabic, character education). Emphasises integration of knowledge and faith: cognitive subjects taught through Islamic values. Often use advanced pedagogies (STEM, digital tools) to appeal to modern parents.
<b>Technology &amp; Innovation</b>	Gradually embracing digital tools (e.g. e-learning for Quran, online broadcasting), but the use varies widely. Top pesantren establish IT labs and entrepreneurship	Growing use of ICT: some madrasahs implement blended learning (Google Classroom, LMS, Kahoot), especially in urban areas. Government programs push digital	Often, the most technologically advanced among Islamic schools. SIT invests in e-learning platforms and STEM labs to stay competitive. Many have computer classes

	units; many still struggle with limited infrastructure.	literacy, but rural madrasahs may lag behind. Leadership training now includes tech adoption.	and incorporate coding, robotics alongside religious activities. Leadership promotes digital literacy aligned with Islamic ethos.
<b>Educational Competitive -ness</b>	Pesantren reputation depends on both spiritual output and academic accreditation. Leading pesantren (e.g. Gontor) compete academically (sending graduates to top universities), while others focus on vocational skills. Competitive advantage: strong moral networking, alumni support. Challenges: aligning with national exam standards can be uneven.	Madrasah are increasingly pressure-tested by PISA scores. The government has elite "Madrasah Aliyah Insan Cendekia" as benchmarks. Many madrasahs attempt to raise competitiveness by improving English/math instruction and forging sister-school programs. However, resource gaps can hinder equal performance.	SIT often markets itself on dual excellence (high test scores + strong religious upbringing). They attract middle-class parents dissatisfied with secular schools. Data show SIT graduates participate more in community service and maintain religious practice at higher rates than their peers. They continuously innovate their curricula (e.g., Kurikulum Merdeka, global collaborations) to remain attractive.
<b>Community &amp; Social Role</b>	Deeply embedded in local communities. Pesantren often provide social services (orphan care, counselling) and act as cultural centres. Leadership involves mediating local conflicts and networking through kinship ties.	Madrasahs serve both religious and national education roles. They often partner with local mosques and parents' associations. Graduates typically enter civil service or continue to pesantren. Madrasah leaders may have less social authority than kyai, but they hold respectable community status.	SIT engages parents and alumni through board governance. They often draw students from wide geographic areas. Community relations involve fundraising and charity work, but less so kinship. Many SITs collaborate with international Islamic organisations to facilitate student exchange and enrich curricula.

Analysing the comparative table above underscores that institutional affiliation and curricular model shape leadership and governance. For example, pesantren's autonomy allows flexible curricula (though some now adopt national standards), whereas madrasahs must conform to MBM policies and K-13 mandates (Erizar et al., 2021; Hasanah, 2021). Integrated schools, leveraging autonomy policies (e.g. *Kurikulum Merdeka*), design hybrid curricula of national and Islamic elements (Utari et al., 2025). As a result, leaders adapt their style to their environment. In a pesantren, a kyai can define educational goals purely through a spiritual lens. A madrasah principal, however, must also work within the framework of state reforms. For SIT leaders, the challenge is to merge entrepreneurial energy with their core religious mission.

Our analysis reveals distinct leadership models in each setting (Table 1). Pesantren leadership is centred on the kyai. The kyai, often the founder or inheritor of the boarding school, wields charismatic authority grounded in scholarship and lineage (Alam, 2018). Decision-making is largely autocratic or paternalistic, though many *kyai* also consult family councils or *pengasuh* (senior teachers). This *kyai*-centric model ensures strong spiritual guidance but may limit administrative innovation. In recent decades, so-called modern pesantren have begun adopting formal management methods. For

example, mid-sized schools now hire dedicated administrative staff, such as principals and vice-principals. They also follow organised daily schedules. These changes exist alongside their traditional, around-the-clock religious instruction. (Mujib et al., 2021). Nevertheless, even modern pesantren tend to emphasise traditional values and personal mentorship by the kyai, blending rational and traditional leadership (Alam, 2018).

Madrasah (Islamic schools under MoRA) employ a more conventional school leadership structure. Principals and vice-principals are usually civil servants with formal education degrees. Leadership styles differ from school to school. For example, principals in more progressive madrasahs often use a democratic approach, empowering their teachers to innovate through a bottom-up management style (Holili et al., 2024). In others, especially in remote or resource-constrained areas, principals exercise a more authoritarian, top-down style. All madrasah leaders must implement MBM in accordance with national regulations (Hasanah, 2021). They report to local MoRA offices and often coordinate with school committees and parent organisations. In practice, madrasah leaders balance compliance with MoRA standards (for religious subjects) and MoEC standards (for academic subjects), a balance that can complicate decision-making (Hasanah, 2021).

Integrated Islamic Schools (SIT) typically operate as private institutions, so their leaders have greater autonomy. Many are founded by educational foundations or modern pesantren networks (e.g. Gontor), and are led by visionary principals or trustees. These leaders often prioritise innovation. They adopt new teaching methods like blended learning and STEAM education, build partnerships, and actively market their schools to attract high-performing students (Fajri & Faizuddin, 2022; Utari et al., 2025). Nevertheless, they maintain an Islamic ethos through daily prayers, moral instruction, and Quranic memorisation. Leaders within this model see faith and knowledge as complementary and equally vital, thus the term “integrated (*terpadu*)”. This is clear at Gontor, where the explicit mission is to produce “well-balanced human beings” who are both practically skilled and spiritually grounded (Fajri & Faizuddin, 2022; Utari et al., 2025). To meet both national and religious goals, SIT schools employ a semi-formal approach. They use the national K-13 curriculum as their foundation for accreditation but build upon it with essential Islamic curricula like Akhlak and Tahfiz (Utari et al., 2025). Many SITs enrol their graduates in national examinations alongside the national schools with secular education. Overall, SIT leadership combines entrepreneurial management with religious vision, reflecting a “combined pedagogy” approach (Fajri & Faizuddin, 2022).

Across all types, leaders are grappling with modern challenges. Pesantren emphasize internal strengths (community support, spiritual formation) but struggles with limited funding and teacher capacity. Madrasah leaders invest in teacher training and seek formal certifications to boost quality. Islamic school leaders focus on competitive features (e.g., exam results, technology) but must navigate the dichotomy between Pancasila-state values and Islamic ethos. In each context, we observed that successful leaders blend respect for tradition with openness to reform.

## DISCUSSION

The comparative findings reveal both convergence and divergence in how faith and knowledge are governed. All three types uphold Islamic identity as a core mission, yet they operationalise it differently. Pesantren excel in instilling deep religious understanding and strong communal ties, owing to the kyai’s personal mentorship. Their leadership culture, steeped in tradition, can foster resilience against ideological drift (Alam, 2018). However, this model may struggle to scale modern pedagogies or to meet national academic standards uniformly. In contrast, madrasahs are more integrated into the state system, which provides resources and recognition but also imposes bureaucratic constraints (Erizar et al., 2021; Hasanah, 2021). School leaders must balance the demands of various stakeholders, including ministry officials, religious councils, and parents. This often slows decision-making, as seen when the bureaucratic demands of the K-13 curriculum placed additional strain on teachers (Erizar et al., 2021; Thusrina & Rusdi, 2024). On the other hand, madrasahs benefit from government programs (such as special budgeting and principal training) aimed at improving Islamic schooling, which some SITs do not receive.

Integrated Islamic Schools (SIT) offers a third alternative. They operate independently of government bureaucracy. This freedom allows their entrepreneurial leaders to adapt curricula and facilities quickly in response to market demands. The rapid growth of SIT (from around 50 schools in 2003 to over 2,000 by 2023) shows strong parental demand for education that promises both world-class academics and sound morals. SIT leaders emphasise innovative educational models (blended learning, competency-

based skills) within a tawhīdic framework (Fajri & Faizuddin, 2022; Utari et al., 2025). This gives SIT a competitive edge but also poses sustainability challenges (maintaining quality across many new schools and ensuring equitable access).

Across the board, the central theme is integration. Effective leaders are those who can successfully bridge the divides between faith and science, tradition and modernity, and institutional autonomy with government regulation. The Indonesian context (a Pancasila state and a diverse society) further demands the values of religious moderation alongside Islamic teachings. Our study shows that the most successful schools are those that consciously blend these elements. A prime example is the modern pesantren, which has moved away from the old dichotomy between religious and secular knowledge, weaving them together into a holistic education (Mujib et al., 2021). Madrasah curricula incorporate character education to unify faith with civic virtues. SIT frameworks are explicitly built on the premise that reason and revelation are complementary sources of knowledge (Utari et al., 2025).

The strategies to address emerging challenges also differ by institution. To foster digitalisation, pesantren may form partnerships with tech companies or universities (as some already do to digitise Qur'anic education), while madrasahs rely on government ICT programs. SIT, driven by tuition revenue, invests proactively in e-learning infrastructure. Regarding competitiveness, SIT aggressively markets academic achievements (often highlighting higher rates of religious activity and moral behaviour), madrasahs leverage scholarship and exam programs (e.g. national awards), and pesantren promote alumni success (many kyais emphasise sending students to top Islamic universities or various jobs and government positions to broaden outreach).

Our findings align with existing theories on leadership in diverse schools. Different governing bodies, such as MoRA, MoEC, and private foundations, shape how schools are run. This matches what institutional theory predicts. For example, pesantren often use informal leadership, while madrasah tend toward formal bureaucracy. Research also shows that charismatic leaders, like those in pesantren, can inspire strong community loyalty. However, this approach can sometimes become too rigid. On the other hand, madrasahs rely on structured systems that help standardise education. But these systems may not provide the same spiritual inspiration. SIT seems to blend both styles. Their leaders have the vision of a traditional kyai but also use modern professional management methods. This creates a balanced and effective form of leadership.

We find that no single model is the best. Instead, each one handles the relationship between faith and knowledge in its own valuable way. This diversity actually strengthens the entire Indonesian Islamic education system. The key takeaway for policymakers is to encourage these different schools to learn from each other. For instance, government training for madrasah principals could include lessons on character education from pesantren. In return, pesantren could use the madrasah's standardized tests to help measure their academic quality. Finally, creating partnerships for shared teacher training or extracurricular programs would allow each model to benefit from the others' strengths.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has provided a detailed comparison of leadership, management, and institutional dynamics across Indonesia's pesantren, madrasah, and Integrated Islamic Schools. Our findings indicate that governance structures (whether under MoRA, MoEC, or autonomous stakeholders) play a major role in shaping each institution's policies and resource allocation. Leadership styles also vary considerably. Pesantren often rely on a charismatic, *kyai*-centered model. Madrasah principals tend to use a blend of democratic and authoritarian approaches. In contrast, SIT schools typically employ innovative and mission-driven leadership. Curriculum implementation differs as well. Pesantren integrates classical Kitab studies with certain elements of the national K-13 curriculum. Madrasah formally adopts the K-13 curriculum, with 30% of subjects being religious, though a study notes ongoing challenges in practice. SIT schools, benefiting from greater autonomy, flexibly combine national and Islamic curricula to align with their educational goals.

Based on the above findings, several recommendations are provided for policymakers, institutional leaders, and researchers to strengthen Islamic education in Indonesia. Firstly, policymakers must recognise the distinct traditions of schools and religious schools while encouraging them to learn from one another. For policymakers, this involves harmonising the different standards set by the MoRA and the MoEC. This would help reduce confusion. Increased funding is also needed to improve the quality

of madrasahs and pesantrens. Creating forums for these different sectors to share effective practices would be beneficial. Legislators could create incentives for religious schools to adopt nationally certified curricula. They could also encourage conventional schools to offer more robust Islamic instruction.

Secondly, at the school level, leaders should pursue professional development that combines leadership training with religious ethics. For instance, leaders of *pesantrens* would benefit from learning modern management and data use. Madrasah and Islamic school principals should continue to build strong partnerships with their communities. Establishing networks for school leaders to coach one another could also support shared learning.

Thirdly, teacher training programs must also adapt. They should provide courses on designing dual curricula, using Islamic teaching methods to build modern skills, and managing school organisations based on research. Ultimately, researchers could help design training programs that could equip teachers with deep subject knowledge and effective techniques for moral education. This dual preparation is the key to unifying faith and knowledge in the classroom.

In conclusion, managing the relationship between faith and knowledge in Indonesia's Islamic schools is complex. Our research highlights the importance of adaptable leadership and policies that encourage cooperation. Policymakers should acknowledge how these different types of schools complement one another. They can do this by supporting shared frameworks, such as joint accreditation standards and collaborative teacher training. Educators, in turn, should keep developing teaching methods that blend Islamic tradition with the skills needed for contemporary life. By learning from the strengths of each model, such as the moral leadership of the pesantren, the structured administration of the madrasah, and the creativity of the SIT system, Indonesian Islamic education can achieve its dual goal. This goal, deeply rooted in faith, is to cultivate knowledgeable and ethical individuals who are prepared to contribute meaningfully to both their religious community and their nation.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

**Muhammad Anis:** Conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft preparation, project administration, corresponding author, and manuscript preparation. **Hussain Othman:** Supervision, validation, critical review of intellectual content, methodology, and writing – review and editing.

## AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

Data available on request from the authors.

## DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used generative AI tools to enhance the clarity of the writing. After using the generative AI tools, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the publication's content.

## ETHIC STATEMENTS

Not applicable

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