The Dynamics of Islamic Education Politics and Their Implications for the Merdeka Curriculum Policy in Islamic Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: This study analyzes the dynamics of Islamic education policy in Indonesia and its implications for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy in Islamic higher education institutions. Using a qualitative approach based on literature review, this article examines the historical, regulatory, and political developments that have influenced the direction of Islamic education from the pre-independence period to the reform era. The results of the study show that political configurations have a significant influence on the formation of the identity, structure, and orientation of Islamic education, especially in terms of curriculum standardization, institutional transformation, and the expansion of academic autonomy. The implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Islamic higher education presents both opportunities and challenges, such as the need to maintain a balance between academic freedom and Islamic epistemology, strengthening lecturer competencies, and managing external partnerships in an ethical and visionary manner.

Keywords: Islamic Education Policy; Merdeka Curriculum; Islamic Higher Education.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menganalisis dinamika politik pendidikan Islam di Indonesia serta implikasinya terhadap implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka melalui kebijakan Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) di perguruan tinggi Islam. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan, artikel ini mengkaji perkembangan historis, regulatif, dan politik yang memengaruhi arah pendidikan Islam dari masa pra-kemerdekaan hingga era reformasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa konfigurasi politik berpengaruh signifikan terhadap pembentukan identitas, struktur, dan

orientasi pendidikan Islam, terutama dalam aspek standardisasi kurikulum, transformasi kelembagaan, dan perluasan otonomi akademik. Implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka di perguruan tinggi Islam menghadirkan peluang sekaligus tantangan, seperti kebutuhan menjaga keseimbangan antara kebebasan akademik dan epistemologi Islam, penguatan kompetensi dosen, serta pengelolaan kemitraan eksternal secara etis dan visioner.

Kata Kunci: Politik Pendidikan Islam; Kurikulum Merdeka; Perguruan Tinggi Islam.

A. Introduction

Facing an era of globalization characterized by accelerated change has driven Indonesia's higher education system to undergo significant transformation, one of which is through the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy. This policy provides greater autonomy and flexibility for higher education institutions in designing and implementing adaptive curricula, while also opening opportunities for students to participate in learning activities outside their primary fields of study to develop cross-disciplinary competencies. As a central strategy of national higher education reform, MBKM is expected to enhance the relevance of graduates to the needs of the labor market and industry, as well as to strengthen students' character, creativity, and innovative capacity. Nevertheless, the implementation of this policy continues to face various challenges, including institutional readiness, faculty engagement, and the effectiveness of partnerships with external stakeholders (Khotimah & Susanti, 2025).

Meanwhile, the existence of Islamic education in Indonesia cannot be separated from the socio-political context that surrounds it. Islamic education continuously interacts with national political dynamics, state regulations, and the construction of religious identity within society. Policies concerning Islamic religious education, the existence of Islamic educational institutions both pesantren and Islamic higher education institutions and the role of Islamic mass organizations all operate within a dynamic relationship between the state, civil society, and religious scholars. A number of recent studies indicate that Islamic education faces various challenges and

opportunities, along with complex implications, as a consequence of the implementation of national education policies that are general and secular in nature (Hakiki et al., 2025). On the other hand, historical studies indicate that from the period of independence through the reform era, Islamic education policies in Indonesia have undergone dynamic evolution, characterized by continuous efforts to adapt to national development orientations and social changes (Bella et al., 2024).

The relationship between Islamic education policy and higher education reform through the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) initiative becomes increasingly significant when examined in the context of Islamic higher education institutions that possess strong religious institutional characteristics and Islamic identity. In practice, the dynamics of Islamic education politics cannot be separated from the roles of the state, Islamic mass organizations, managing foundations, and pesantren networks that collectively shape the direction of higher education policy, including the process of curriculum adaptation that demands flexibility and relevance to labor market needs (Ananda et al., 2022). Scholars of Islamic education negotiate the representation of religious values so that they remain integrated amid the push of MBKM policies oriented toward professional competencies and the demands of educational globalization (Muzakki, 2023). These efforts have implications for curriculum restructuring, the enhancement of lecturers' capacity, and the strengthening of external partnerships as part of institutional adaptation strategies in Islamic higher education institutions (Habibi, 2022).

Nevertheless, a number of studies also indicate that the implementation of MBKM in Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions (PTKI) faces various obstacles, such as limited resources, institutional readiness, and challenges in maintaining the legitimacy of religious values amid market pressures and government policies (Bhakti et al., 2022). Furthermore, this dynamic underscores the existence of a dialectic between Islamic spiritual values and the rationality of modern education policies that demand efficiency, competence, and global competitiveness (Saputra, 2025). Thus, the relationship between Islamic education politics and the MBKM policy is not merely structural in nature, but also ideological, as it involves an ongoing process of

negotiating meanings among Islamic identity, state policies, and the demands of higher education modernization in Indonesia.

Several relevant studies provide important insights into the relationship between flexible curriculum policies and the development of Islamic education in Indonesia. First, research on the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy in higher education shows that curriculum flexibility encompassing lecturer involvement, collaboration with off-campus partners, and institutional readiness is a key factor in successful implementation (Khotimah & Susanti, 2025). Second, research on Islamic education policy in Indonesia emphasizes that the political agenda of Islamic education influences regulations, curricula, and the institutional structures of Islamic educational institutions, both from national and local perspectives (Nawazir & Aprison, 2022). Third, there are studies that examine the diversity of Islamic education policies, highlighting how legal frameworks such as Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, institutional regulations, and the integration of religious education into the national system generate both challenges and opportunities for Islamic education (Sari & Khoiri, 2023).

Although numerous studies have examined MBKM and Islamic education separately, there remains a significant research gap in studies that specifically connect the dynamics of Islamic education politics with the implementation of the flexible MBKM curriculum in Islamic higher education institutions. This gap indicates a strong need for policy analysis that involves educational experts, curriculum processes, and institutional impacts. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the dynamics of Islamic education politics and how they influence the direction of higher education policy in Indonesia, to explain the relationship between Islamic education politics and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in higher education, and to identify the implications of Islamic education politics for curriculum development and academic practices in Islamic higher education institutions. Accordingly, this article is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of Islamic higher education policies that are equitable, contextual, and future-oriented.

B. Research Method

This study uses a library research approach because the topic being studied is conceptual and normative in nature, namely analyzing the relationship between Islamic education policy and the Merdeka Curriculum policy in the context of higher education. This approach was chosen because the issues discussed do not require the collection of empirical field data, but rather the exploration and analysis of relevant academic literature. Literature research aims to examine, interpret, and construct a theoretical understanding from various credible sources so that it can be used to answer research questions in an argumentative and scientific manner (Zed, 2014).

This type of research is descriptive-analytical qualitative research, which seeks to describe and analyze the phenomenon of Islamic education policy in relation to the direction of higher education policy, particularly the Merdeka Curriculum. The descriptive-analytical approach was chosen because it is suitable for explaining the relationship between concepts and interpreting the meaning of policies based on textual data from various academic literature. Qualitative research emphasizes in-depth analysis of texts and documents to discover conceptual meanings and patterns of relationships between social variables that cannot be measured quantitatively (Miles & Huberman, 2014).

The data sources for this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data includes books and scientific works that directly discuss the themes of Islamic education policy, higher education policy, and the Merdeka Curriculum. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from educational theory books, Scopus-indexed articles, and official policies from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. One relevant international reference is Klaus Krippendorff's (2018) Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology, which explains content analysis techniques as a way to interpret the meaning of academic texts and documents.

The data collection technique was carried out in three stages, namely literature inventory, classification of sources based on theme, and content analysis. In the first stage, researchers searched various sources from national journal repositories such as SINTA, Neliti, and Garuda Kemdikbud, as well as international portals such as Google

Scholar and Scopus. The second stage involved grouping the literature into broad themes, namely: (1) Islamic education policy in Indonesia, (2) higher education policy and the Merdeka Curriculum, and (3) the epistemology of Islamic education. The final stage was to analyze the content of the literature to find patterns of relationships and conceptual arguments between authors.

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive qualitative methods, which describe the findings of the literature in the form of argumentative narratives. This technique involves three main steps: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 2014). In this context, data collected from various literature sources was reduced to focus on the main themes, then presented in the form of a narrative description illustrating the relationship between Islamic education policy and national curriculum policy. The final stage was to verify and draw conclusions by comparing findings between sources to obtain a valid and comprehensive understanding.

To ensure data validity, this study uses source and theory triangulation techniques, which involve comparing various references from different disciplines and contexts to ensure consistency of interpretation (Sugiyono, 2020).

C. Results and Discussion

Dynamics of Islamic Education Politics

The development of Islamic education in Indonesia cannot be separated from the dynamics of political power that have prevailed in every historical period. As an integral component of the national education system, the implementation of Islamic education is grounded in the state's ideological and juridical principles, such as Pancasila, the Constitution, as well as various decrees of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) and other regulations that serve as the normative foundation for its practice. From the pre-independence period to the reform era, politics has consistently exerted a substantial influence in shaping the direction, structure, and orientation of Islamic education in Indonesia. These dynamics reflect the capacity of Islamic

education to adapt, negotiate, and undergo transformation in response to changing political configurations and power interests at each historical phase.

In the pre-independence period, Islamic education developed as a manifestation of cultural resistance against Dutch colonial domination. The Ethical Policy implemented by the colonial government, with its emphasis on Western-oriented education, positioned madrasahs and pesantren in a marginal role within the formal education system (Hoddin, 2020). In this context, pesantren functioned as arenas of struggle and the formation of Muslim identity through the teaching of religious values and the cultivation of national character. Pesantren and madrasahs served as alternative educational institutions that integrated Islamic values with a spirit of nationalism in confronting the hegemony of the secular colonial education system (Azra, 1999). These colonial political dynamics ultimately encouraged Islamic educational institutions to develop institutional autonomy, adopt a community-oriented approach, and take a resistant stance toward the discriminatory Western education system.

During the Old Order period (1945–1966), Islamic education began to gain political legitimacy following Indonesia's independence. The government sought to integrate madrasahs into the national education system, although their position remained subordinate. Law No. 4 of 1950 on the Fundamentals of Education and Instruction in Schools did not explicitly recognize Islamic education as an essential part of the national education system, but merely accommodated religious education as a supplementary component (Perundang-undangan, 1954). During this period, there were political dynamics marked by tensions between secular nationalist and Islamist groups in determining the direction of national education. Nevertheless, the establishment of the State Islamic University (PTAIN) in 1950 in Yogyakarta became an important milestone for the formal recognition of the existence of Islamic education at the university level. Abuddin Nata (2011) emphasized that this phase was the beginning of the politicization of Islamic education in Indonesia, where education policy served as an arena for compromise between state ideology and the aspirations of Muslims.

During the New Order era (1966–1998), Islamic education faced complex political dynamics and numerous limitations. The Soeharto administration, which was oriented

towards political stability and economic growth, implemented ideological uniformity through the Pancasila single principle policy, which also influenced the direction of national education policy. In this context, Islamic education was strictly integrated into the national education system under the coordination of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but with limited ideological freedom. The government encouraged the adjustment of the madrasah curriculum to be in line with public schools through the 1975 Joint Decree of Three Ministers (SKB), which established the equivalence of diplomas and curricula between the two (Ramadhan & Hartati, 2023). On the one hand, this policy provides opportunities for madrasah graduates to continue their education to a higher level, but on the other hand, it creates a process of homogenization that has the potential to reduce Islamic characteristics in Islamic educational institutions. Islamic boarding schools have undergone structural and curricular transformations in an effort to adapt to the demands of modernization directed and controlled by the state (Dhofier, 2011).

During the Reformation era (1998–present), Islamic education underwent significant political and institutional revitalization. This period was marked by the opening up of a wider democratic space, allowing for freer expression of religion and institutional autonomy in Islamic education. The enactment of Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System was an important milestone that affirmed the position of Islamic education as equal to general education in the national education system. Through this regulation, madrasas and Islamic boarding schools gained formal recognition as educational institutions with equal rights in terms of curriculum management, funding, and institutional development (Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2003). In addition, the institutional transformation from IAIN to UIN (State Islamic University) reflects a more integrative scientific paradigm shift between religious and general sciences, marking a new chapter in the direction of Islamic education policy in Indonesia. The reform era brought about a paradigm shift from an exclusive Islamic education model to a more inclusive and interconnected model, in line with the spirit of democratization and openness in the world of education (Mastuhu, 1999).

Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic Higher Education Institutions

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic higher education institutions is an integral part of the national Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia since 2020. This policy is designed to create a higher education system that is more adaptive, flexible, and responsive to the dynamics of community needs and developments in the world of work. From the perspective of national education policy, the Merdeka Curriculum serves as a strategic instrument in strengthening the agenda of higher education modernization so that it can compete globally, without abandoning local and religious values, including in the context of Islamic higher education. Nadiem Anwar Makarim emphasized that the essence of the MBKM policy is to grant academic autonomy to students and lecturers in order to create a learning process that is more contextual, collaborative, and oriented towards the optimal development of individual potential (Kemendikbudristek, 2024).

Conceptually, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic higher education institutions is based on the principles of student-centered learning (SCL) and outcome-based education (OBE), which place students as active subjects in the learning process (Islam, 2020). Through this approach, students are given the opportunity to undertake learning processes outside their study programs for a maximum of three semesters, covering various activities such as internships, research, humanitarian projects, student exchanges, and social entrepreneurship. This paradigm shift not only reconstructs the curriculum structure but also demands fundamental changes in the epistemological and managerial order of higher education. Mulyasa emphasizes that this transformation requires comprehensive reform of the quality assurance system, the development of a curriculum based on learning outcomes, and an increase in the capacity of lecturers to be able to act as facilitators who are reflective, innovative, and adaptive to the needs of students (Mulyasa, 2023). In this context, higher education is required to produce graduates who are not only academically and cognitively superior, but also possess adaptability, social sensitivity, and high moral integrity.

In the implementation process, Islamic universities face various challenges as well as strategic opportunities. As institutions that seek to integrate Islamic values with modern science, Islamic universities are required to adapt the Merdeka Curriculum without sacrificing their epistemological identity and scientific character. Islamic education has a distinctive orientation in shaping well-rounded individuals (insan kamil), so the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy needs to be internalized within an integrative and interconnective Islamic epistemological framework. (Nata, 2019). Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum cannot be understood solely as a form of administrative deregulation, but must be interpreted as a strategic step to expand and enrich the horizons of Islamic scholarship so that it remains relevant to contemporary global challenges such as digitalization, sustainability, and social ethics. For example, a number of State Islamic Universities (UIN) have initiated integrative curriculum models in the implementation of MBKM, such as UIN Sunan Kalijaga with an integrative knowledge approach and UIN Syarif Hidayatullah with a transdisciplinary Islamic studies paradigm, which represent the synergy between Islamic studies, science, and the humanities in a unified scientific whole (A'la & Makhshun, 2022).

However, in practice, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in higher education institutions still faces various obstacles, both structural and cultural. From a structural perspective, not all higher education institutions have adequate academic and institutional infrastructure to support the implementation of cross-study program and cross-campus learning. Meanwhile, from a cultural perspective, some lecturers and students still show a tendency to think conservatively about curriculum changes and innovative learning methods. Findings from research conducted by Arifin and Muslim (2020) reveal that resistance to MBKM policies is often caused by a lack of socialization, differences in perceptions of the meaning of academic freedom, and the unpreparedness of the academic administration system in higher education institutions. Therefore, curriculum reform in Islamic higher education requires visionary and participatory transformational leadership, capable of fostering an academic culture that

is adaptive to change, and encouraging the creation of an open, collaborative learning system based on Islamic scientific and ethical values.

In addition, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in higher education also represents the direction of national education policy transformation towards decentralization and academic autonomy. Within this framework, the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy gives universities the freedom to design curricula that are more contextual and relevant to local needs and characteristics, including in terms of strengthening students' religious and social values. Tilaar (2008), emphasizes that educational autonomy is a fundamental prerequisite for the realization of democratic, participatory higher education that is in tune with the dynamics of society. Therefore, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum can be understood as a strategic and political step to strengthen the independence of higher education institutions, reduce dependence on central policies that tend to be bureaucratic, and encourage the creation of more innovative and responsive education governance in line with the needs of the times.

Overall, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in higher education, especially in Islamic higher education institutions, cannot be understood merely as a technical change in the curriculum structure, but rather as a form of transformation of the national education paradigm that emphasizes harmony between academic freedom, social relevance, and the integration of spiritual values. From the perspective of Islamic education policy, the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to become a strategic instrument in developing an adaptive model of Islamic higher education that responds to the currents of globalization while remaining grounded in authentic Islamic values. Thus, the success of the Merdeka Curriculum's implementation in higher education institutions greatly depends on the institutions' ability to balance government policy directions, the needs of the workforce, and Islamic scientific idealism oriented towards the formation of a complete human being (insan kamil) and social welfare.

Implications for Islamic Education Policy

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly through the Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy, has strategic implications for

Islamic higher education institutions (PTI), covering aspects of scientific identity, curriculum design, lecturer competencies, and partnerships with various external stakeholders. From the perspective of scientific identity, the MBKM policy provides opportunities for Islamic study programs, including Islamic Religious Education (PAI), to develop more contextual and interdisciplinary learning, so that Islamic values can be integrated with 21st-century competencies without reducing the substance of the teachings of faith and jurisprudence that form its foundation (Habibi, 2022).

In terms of curriculum design, the flexibility offered by MBKM encourages the development of learning modules, practice-based courses, as well as project-based learning and community service programs that are relevant to the context of Islamic boarding schools, madrasas, and local Muslim communities (Ananda et al., 2022). However, its implementation requires strict internal policies to maintain a balance between religious content and academic standards.

The capacity of lecturers is also a crucial element. Educators at PTI are required to have adaptive pedagogical competencies, authentic assessment skills, and adequate digital literacy in order to effectively implement independent learning, internships, and research collaboration. In addition, the MBKM policy opens up opportunities for expanding partnerships with various parties such as industry, religious institutions, and community groups that can enrich students' learning experiences, but at the same time requires ethical, focused, and harmonious partnership management in line with the vision of Islamic education (Badri & Sassi, 2024).

Therefore, Islamic universities need to formulate contextual MBKM implementation guidelines based on Islamic values, including strategies for empowering lecturers, mechanisms for assessing religious and professional competencies, and quality-oriented academic partnership standards. Thus, curriculum freedom within the MBKM framework can be optimized without causing institutional identity disorientation or degradation of the quality of Islamic education.

Table 1. Implications for Islamic Education Policy

Aspects of Education Policy	Implications of the Merdeka Curriculum
Curriculum Development	a. Greater autonomy: Islamic universities have

	the freedom to design curricula according to student characteristics and the needs of the workforce. b. Flexibility: The curriculum is designed to be adaptive to developments in science, technology, and social dynamics. c. Competency-based: The curriculum focuses on developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are relevant to professional and job market demands.
Learning Methods	a. Active learning: Students are actively involved through discussions, projects, and research to develop independent learning skills. b. Use of technology: The learning process increasingly utilizes information and communication technology to improve the effectiveness and interactivity of learning. c. Problem-based learning: The learning strategy focuses on solving real problems that are relevant to the needs and challenges of society.
Assessment	a. Emphasizing students' ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world contexts. b. Continuous assessment is carried out systematically and continuously to monitor and evaluate the progress of student learning outcomes.
Faculty & Staff Capacity	a. Lecturers need pedagogical competence, authentic assessment, and digital literacy.
Partnerships & Networks	a. Partnership management that is in line with Islamic values and educational objectives is necessary.
Infrastructure & Funding	a. The implementation of MBKM (internships, research, digital) requires infrastructure and funding support to ensure effective learning.
Internal regulations and government policies	a. Internal regulations are needed to maintain a balance between academic freedom and Islamic identity. b. The government needs to conduct periodic evaluations of education policies to assess their effectiveness and relevance.

D. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the dynamics of Islamic education policy in Indonesia play an important role in determining the direction and development of Islamic education over time. From the colonial period to the reform era, political changes, state regulations, and ideological interests have influenced curriculum design, institutional identity, and the legitimacy of Islamic education in the national education system. In the current context, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum through the Merdeka Belajar Kurikulum Merdeka (MBKM) policy in Islamic higher education institutions shows a paradigm shift that demands increased academic autonomy, curriculum flexibility, and a focus on future competencies.

However, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic higher education institutions is not without challenges, such as limited infrastructure, uneven lecturer capacity, academic cultural resistance, and the need to maintain the integrity of Islamic epistemology. On the other hand, this policy also offers strategic opportunities, including strengthening scientific integration, expanding partnerships, and increasing the relevance of graduates to the needs of society and the world of work. Thus, the success of MBKM implementation is largely determined by the ability of Islamic higher education institutions to navigate national policy demands, labor market needs, and core Islamic educational values. This underscores the need for visionary, inclusive, and contextual policies in building adaptive, innovative Islamic higher education that remains grounded in Islamic principles.

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