

Islamic Public Administration in Indonesia: Eco-Pesantren as a Nexus of Education and Sustainability

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Abstract

The existence of local values in administrative systems and public services has been widely recognized and practiced. Islamic values and institutions in the study of public administration are also increasingly gaining interest in scholarship, with both theoretical and empirical studies being conducted in several countries on the coexistence of Islamic values with public administration to strengthen public services. *Pesantren*, Islamic education institutions in Indonesia that have long played a role in various social services, have become a community driving force in the context of environmental activism, for example, for waste processing and sustainable use of water resources. This paper explores the role of *pesantren* in environmentally friendly waste and water management. Our findings reveal that Islamic values cultivated within *pesantren* effectively guide communities toward sustainable waste and water management.

Keywords: Education, Sustainability, Environmental Challenges, Waste Management, Community Engagement.

Introduction

Islamic public administration (PA) is a burgeoning field that is gaining scholarly recognition and prominence within administrative science. The recognition of Islam's legitimacy, and thereby Western-style administration's lack of monopoly, is not solely due to the alignment of Islam's fundamental values with universal principles. It is also attributed to the deconstruction of the synthesized terminology of good governance, which is based on perceived global standards rooted in PA norms and practices prevalent in Western countries. The essence is in the delineation and criteria used to define the concept of good governance. Despite the formulation and endorsement of its implementation by international organizations in several countries, including advanced industrial nations and emerging economies, the manifestation of good governance remains profoundly embedded in the historical determinants of each country. The existence of many interpretations and manifestations has led to many faces of public management reform (Wescott et al. 2009; Haque 2022), particularly in Eastern and Southern European countries (Randma-Liiv and Drechsler 2017; Drechsler and Randma-Liiv 2015, 2016; Drechsler 2005, 2009)¹ as well as in their Asian counterparts, specifically in East and Southeast Asia (Berman 2011; Berman and Prasajo 2018; Cheung 2013; Haque et al. 2023; Haque

¹ See also: Bouckaert et al. 2011; Kostadinova and Neshkova 2013; Meyer-Sahling 2010.

2007, 2013; Nakamura 2021). Regardless, the concurrent growth of multicultural traditions as a determining factor also contributes to advancing a discourse that leads to the recognition of Islamic PA in administrative science (Drechsler et al. 2023).

The recent emergence of Islamic PA has garnered a growing interest due to at least two notable factors. In contrast to Chinese PA, Islamic PA is not inherently associated with certain ethnic identities or entities, a distinction that has been acknowledged in the scholarly debate on PA (Drechsler 2013). Despite Chinese PA and Islamic PA originating from institutionalization on an imperial level, it can be argued that Islamic PA possesses a historical foundation of systematic legal codification and has emerged as a definitive point of reference (Kay 2023; Samier 2017). This is noteworthy, considering that many, if not most, countries with a predominantly Muslim population – that is, Muslim countries – presently operate under secular political systems and laws.

Furthermore, according to Chafik and Drechsler (2022), the presence of Islamic ideals inside the institutional framework of Muslim nations does not automatically imply that the administrative system may be classified as non-Western. The historical context of colonialism and the practice of sending a portion of the population to Western countries for education in PA has resulted in the adoption of Western systems and styles in administrative development, both in poorer and wealthier countries. However, this adoption has not prevented the existing Islamic value system and formal institutions from infusing the established administrative system, or in continuing to exist in parallel with them.

Similarly, the question of acknowledging Islamic PA needs to provide a solution for integrating the Islamic value system within the established Western-style administrative structure (Kay 2023). The inquiry at hand assumes particular significance when considering Muslim nations beyond the confines of the Middle East, wherein Islam is often accorded primacy within societal structures and even governmental systems, albeit in some cases without formal designation as the official state religion.

In recognizing Islamic PA as both a paradigm and a practice, this paper seeks to explore its role in fostering co-creation in public service. We examine how Islamic values and institutions contribute to building trust, fostering community partnerships, and enhancing the responsiveness of PA systems. By situating Islamic PA within the broader discourse on public service innovation and co-creation, the discussion highlights its potential to address the complex challenges of governance in diverse and rapidly changing societies.

Our geographical focus is on Indonesia, a country that presents three salient situational considerations:

1. Indonesia's status as one of the world's most populous countries, and at the same time it is predominantly Muslim;
2. its geographical location is far outside the Middle East area; and
3. its emphasis on Islam as one of the primary sources of moral and ethical norms even without its Muslim citizens speaking Arabic or being immersed in the Middle Eastern culture.

The primary aspect of societal and governmental affairs is the absence of Islam formalization as the official legal framework of the state. The Islamic boarding school educational institution – referred to as *Pesantren* in Indonesia – is often regarded as a pivotal institution in bridging Islamic principles with PA practices, particularly with respect to its connections with policy processes and public service delivery.

A great number of *pesantren* in Indonesia have and continue to contribute to the common good, whether the role of a contributor to public services such as education, healthcare, and disaster relief; an initiator of sustainable development; a propeller of local economic potential; or a producer of school graduates with vocational expertise (Hudaefi and Heryani 2019). Their deep integration into local communities, coupled with their influence as centers of Islamic learning, positions *pesantren* as pivotal actors for addressing societal challenges. This paper will explore the evolving role of *pesantren* in climate change mitigation, emphasizing their potential to align religious teachings with sustainable practices. By leveraging their community influence and moral authority, *pesantren* emerge as key contributors to environmental conservation and resilience efforts.

Public Administration in Indonesian Islam: How Long Can You Go?

The scholarly pursuit of Islamic PA stems from examinations of the fundamental values, beliefs, and traditional norms that underpin public sector management (Yesilkagit 2010). Incorporation of values into a conventional ethical framework is not only limited to emerging economies but is evident in Western countries – think of, for instance, the embodiment of Protestant ethics from the Weberian perspective (Ebner 2010; Eisenstadt 1967; Weber 2005). Nevertheless, the actualization of PA in Western nations has, or so it is still often argued, undergone a process of modernization, which is influenced by factors such as viewpoint, legitimacy, and the establishment of a legal and rational framework (Ongaro 2021; Rosenbloom 1983; Sterling and Moore 1987). In contrast, this comprehensive modernization is not entirely realized in the second and third-world countries, particularly within Muslim-majority countries – the Islamic world. Neoliberalism, New Public Management, and the subsequent development of PA, which was more derived from democratic and market governance principles, have influenced PA globally (Drechsler 2020; Haque et al. 2021; Painter and Peters 2010).

Globalization has imposed intellectual imperialism on Arab and Islamic regimes across the Middle East, exacerbating the Islam-government divide (Hummel 2019; Moloney et al. 2022). Islamic and industrialized societies vary because Islamic beliefs seem to conflict with classically modern managerial practices, resulting in an unproductive workforce (Kuran 2011). Private sector and government administrations use the Western management style notwithstanding its incompatibility with Islam. Broadly speaking, Western philosophy promotes independence and profit, whereas Islamic thought emphasizes collaboration and societal good (Ongaro 2021; Samier 2017).

Moreover, the Islamic World in the aftermath of decolonization diverges from Western nations' modernization and democratization trajectories (Kuru 2014). The phenomenon in this context pertains to the alignment between establishing and advancing administrative systems and practices upon different levels of government and the approaches adopted by Western

nations and endorsed by international organizations advocating such reforms – the perceived global-Western PA. This institutional isomorphism arises from one or more factors, including coercion, normative influence, and explicit imitation. Notwithstanding these realms, it can be observed that while PA strives to adhere to isomorphism, there is a simultaneous tendency of divergence in its development, which is determined by the socio-cultural landscapes of diverging values and cultures (Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2017; Jackson and Medvedev 2024; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Given the wide array of diverse cultures of Muslim nations, plural interpretations and manifestations of the global Western PA in the Islamic world are inevitable.

Despite their differences, non-Muslim and Islamic leadership styles are comparable, as the two share universal values as part of their worldview. Islamic leadership focuses on service, protection, and administration (ElKaleh 2023; Hassan and Ahmad 2021). Honesty, justice, compassion, consultation, tolerance, kindness, empathy, and patience underpin these tasks, which are also prominent in Western nations. The manifestation of such shared universal values in the Islamic world does not necessarily make its PA non-Western. However, Western models alone cannot solve work quality issues in many management contexts, especially in the public sector in the Islamic world. From a normative viewpoint, Islamic work ethics boost the quality of work and organizational performance (Daneefard and Azar 2021). These variables support social progress, stability, and economic prosperity.

The essential principles of Islam and people's cultural origins must be linked to those shared notions of virtues to make them effective, relevant, and applicable. The Islamic educational paradigm may improve work practices undermining development in Muslim nations. Right at this point, the educational institutions known as *pesantren* in Indonesia might play crucial roles (Dhofier 1982; Lukens-Bull 2019). *Pesantren* take the Islamic educational tradition of *madrasa* to the next level, in which they integrate conventional training comprising cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects alongside an applied ethical upbringing (i.e., character development or *tarbiya*) throughout students' daily lives within a nurtured socio-cultural environment (Herdiansyah et al. 2018; Saputro and Anwar 2021).

Pesantren, as an educational institution, is not exclusive to Indonesia. It has also been established as a fully institutionalized educational institution in adjacent countries, such as Malaysia and Thailand (Lukens-Bull 2010). *Pesantren* in Indonesia possess historically rooted modalities to effectively engage their graduates in addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by society. This involvement can occur at the individual level and within Islamic religious organizations, particularly those associated with the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah (Bruinessen 2013). These organizations have played a significant role in the nation's development since its uprising against colonial rule and subsequent post-independence development (Azra 2013; Ricklefs 2012; Steenbrink 2014).

The considerable importance of *pesantren* institutions in Indonesia since its independence until the present may be attributed to at least two primary reasons. The first reason entails the capacity to establish a bond and incorporate Islamic principles with the cultivation of nationalism. However, the essence of resistance, characterized by the concept of *jihad fi sabilillah* – equivalent to outward physical struggle in Western terminology – against colonialism, is deeply ingrained as a fundamental value throughout the institutionalization of *pesantren* and the organized involvement of their graduates in societal and governmental

matters. The concrete manifestation of this has reached an advanced stage, materializing the national consensus as the philosophy of the five principles called *Pancasila* including (i) belief in God, (ii) just and civilized humanity, (iii) the unity of Indonesia, (iv) democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations among representatives, and (v) social justice for all the people of Indonesia (Khamdan and Wiharyani 2018). *Pancasila* bears a closer resemblance to Rousseau's social contract than the gradual process of modernization leading to the establishment of civil religion in Europe following the adoption of the Westphalian-style modern state system (Holidin 2022).

Eco-Pesantren: Foundations and Applications

Pesantren, increasingly aware of global environmental challenges, have actively contributed to addressing issues such as climate change and global warming by incorporating environmental *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence on the environment) into their practices (Turnbull 2021). This was solidified in 1994 during Nahdlatul Ulama's 29th Congress in Cipasung, where polluting the environment was declared *haram* (forbidden) and a criminal act (*jarimah*) (Mufid 2020). Following the 2007 Bali Action Plan, the Lajnah Bahtsul Masail (LBM), a central institution in Nahdlatul Ulama, began taking a more active role in responding to environmental issues. Through *halaqah* (intellectual forums), Islamic scholars and environmental experts came together to develop *green fatwas*, which not only addressed specific environmental concerns but also emphasized Islamic principles such as *amanah* (responsibility), *hifz al-bi'ah* (protection of the environment), and *rahmat lil 'alamin* (mercy and compassion for the universe) (Sobirin and Khasanah 2023). These *fatwas* stressed that environmental conservation is a duty for all Muslims, advocating for practices such as reducing carbon emissions and endorsing carbon trading as permissible under Islamic law.

The practical impact of these *green fatwas* has been far-reaching, particularly in *pesantren*, where environmental education and conservation efforts have become central to their mission. *Pesantren*, as traditional Islamic educational institutions, are increasingly integrating environmental sustainability into their programs. They promote initiatives like reforestation, sustainable land use, and waste management, transforming themselves into hubs for environmental conservation and public education on climate change. These efforts have been further supported through collaborations with the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry and Environment, which recognizes *pesantren* as strategic partners in environmental conservation (Herdiansyah et al. 2018). The involvement of *pesantren* in these initiatives reflects a broader commitment to aligning Islamic principles with modern environmental challenges, positioning them as important contributors to both religious and national efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change (Habibi et al. 2022).

This partnership has led to the concept of *eco-pesantren*, rewarding *pesantren* for innovative practices in environmental development. Aulia et al. (2017) highlighted the *eco-pesantren* initiative as an environmentally conscious educational institution aiming to contribute to nature protection and environmental preservation. The approach combines Islamic principles of environmental protection with traditional conservation methods (Mangunjaya and McKay 2012). It is a collaborative effort involving *pesantren* and various stakeholders to implement programs such as waste banks, environmental cleanliness campaigns, sustainable land

use, increased cultivation of medicinal plants, and integrating environmental education into the curriculum (Herdiansyah et al. 2018). Among the most impactful initiatives are waste management and water recycling, which have become central to the *eco-pesantren* model.

Waste Bank

The Indonesia Ministry of Environment reports that almost 50% of waste sources are dominated by household waste (Media Indonesia 2022). *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) have become one of the entities that contribute to producing household waste in Indonesia. The activities of *pesantren* residents, which begin from waking up until returning to rest, involve a fairly busy routine, supported by a very large human resource base, and facilities that remain inadequate (El Madaniya 2024). This implies that *pesantren* produce a considerable amount of waste with insufficient waste management. Furthermore, the public often perceives that *pesantren* are still not effectively managing their household waste.

A rough assumption made by the environmental observers is that every day each person contributes 0.6 kg of waste (Ulinnuha 2023). If we multiply this by the total number of students in *pesantren*, which is estimated to reach 4.85 million people in 2023 (detik.com 2024), the daily waste produced by *pesantren* in Indonesia amounts to 82.5 tons. However, *pesantren* are a potential partner in expanding waste banks to address current environmental issues. It has been highlighted in various studies that waste banks are an effective way for communities to tackle the waste accumulation and production which is increasing.

One of the waste banks that has been developed at the Pesantren Al-Ihya in Cilacap Regency started in 2012 and is still a profitable business unit for *pesantren*. The initiative to establish the waste bank was catalyzed by the increasing volume of waste accumulation and the insufficient landfill space to accommodate the growing waste. The waste bank uses the concept of waste segregation between organic and inorganic waste, allowing the waste to be reused to minimize pollution, disease, and environmental issues caused by waste accumulation.



Figure 1: Sorting inorganic and organic waste. Source: PP Al Ihya, 2024.

According to data, Al-Ihya Islamic Boarding School itself produces 1.2 to 2 tons of waste per day (Lutfiani 2022). The waste generated is collected as savings for the *pesantren*'s residents

(See Figure 1). The management of inorganic waste is processed into handicraft products (See Figure 2), which can be used by the *pesantren* residents or given to the surrounding residents. These handicrafts can even be sold. Certainly, this is not only done by Al-Ihya Islamic Boarding School but also by other *pesantren*, for example, Darusallam Islamic Boarding School and Annuqayah Lubangsa Islamic Boarding School.



Figure 2 : Processing waste into craft goods. Source: opop.jatimprov.go.id, 2021 (left) and lubangsa, 2021 (right).

Meanwhile, organic waste (food waste) such as vegetables, rice, and other leftovers becomes the main source for maggot farming (See Figure 3). Al-Ihya Islamic Boarding School cultivates maggots that feed on food waste, and the maggots are harvested once a week, producing more or less 50 kg (Lutfiani 2022). The harvested maggots are used as livestock feed for the *pesantren*'s animals farm and eventually for market selling.



Figure 3: Waste management into maggots for animal feed and selling. Source: PP Al Ihya, 2024.

Other than providing social and environmental benefits, such as a clean and comfortable living environment, the waste bank also provides economic benefits from the sale of waste that has been processed by the Pesantren Al-Ihya Waste Bank. The proceeds are returned to the depositors and the *pesantren*. The depositors use the earnings to meet their daily needs while at the *pesantren*, while the funds returned to the *pesantren* are managed to assist less fortunate students and the surrounding community, for example, by providing free food donations. Since 2020, the utilization of waste for this purpose has been carried out and is referred to as "waste charity" generated by the depositors. The benefits of this initiative are not only felt by Al-Ihya Pesantren but also by the surrounding community, such as residents of Kesugihan Kidul Village in Kesugihan District, Cilacap Regency (Pcnucilacap 2023).

(Ablution) Water

In general, *pesantren* in Indonesia rely on groundwater for daily needs such as bathing, washing, drinking, and performing ablution (Akhmaddhian et al. 2023). This demand is not balanced by the availability and quality of water. As of 2023, there exists a clean water crisis that is still being experienced by hundreds of *pesantren* across Indonesia (Asianpost.id 2024). The water crisis that they experience starts from groundwater that tends to become turbid during high rainfall and from water shortages during the dry season (Beritajateng 2024). To address this issue, *pesantren* have started recycling wastewater, particularly after the use of ablution water.

An estimated calculation of the daily water needed for each student during ablution is about 2 liters, if multiplied by the five daily prayers and the total number of students, the amount of water wasted after ablution quickly adds up to a non-trivial amount (Citarum.jabarprov.go.id 2024). For example, the number of students in 2017 in Garut was 68,000. Therefore, 2 liters $\times$ 5 $\times$ 68,000 results in 680,000 liters of water being wasted every day. This estimate applies to *pesantren* in a single city or district. Now, consider the total number of *pesantren* in Indonesia, which reached 30,494 in 2021.

The potential for clean water generated through the recycling of ablution water is substantial and can be continuously utilized for other needs such as bathing, washing, greening, irrigating rice fields, and fish farming. In addition to providing clean water, it is important to maintain the water channels to ensure that water flows smoothly without blockages, preventing stagnant, dirty water from accumulating around the *pesantren*. The benefits of recycled ablution water, when the flow channels are properly maintained, can extend to agricultural irrigation, making farming systems cleaner and healthier. This agricultural concept has been implemented by various *pesantren*, including Pesantren Ath-Thaariq in Garut, West Java (Muhardi et al. 2020).

The process of recycling ablution water is simply performed by using a filtration system to turn the used water into reusable and non-consumable water (See Figure 4). Ablution water is categorized as water that is free from chemical contamination (Viva.co.id 2016), making it suitable for simple filtration to manage the used water. There are three main infrastructures in the filtration process: (1) a pond with a base of river stones, (2) a filtration device that is made

out of stones and sand, and (3) a tank where the water is collected after passing through the filtration system (Malik and Nafi 2019). Of course, this filtration process is not as simple as it seems. Proper water management requires careful planning, research, appropriate governance, technology adaptation, and also long-term evaluation and maintenance of the system filtration infrastructure.



Figure 4: Water filtration pool. Source: Irmawanty and Syam, 2024.

The *pesantren* have made efforts to embody Islamic teachings with a spirit of building an ecological culture, one of which is by conserving water (Maula 2022). Certainly, this aligns with the interpretation of the Prophet's (p.b.u.h) saying, which teaches that humans are beings who not only interact with themselves and others but also with the environment. Therefore, the concept of Pesantren Ath-Thaariq demonstrates that the role of students who care for ecology is equally important as caring for themselves and the natural world.



Figure 5: Water ablation (used) for fish ponds. Source: detik.com, 2022 (left); mihidayatulislam, 2024 (right).

The recycled ablation water at Pesantren Ath-Thaariq is also used to support animal habitats, such as tilapia and catfish ponds (see Figure 5). The fish are not only harvested, but the pond water is also managed for irrigating plants. The fish are fed with snails cultivated in the pond, and these snails are also consumable. The fish produced can be consumed by the Pesantren residents, and any surplus is sold to the local community at more affordable prices (Detik.com 2022).

The efforts for water efficiency by this *pesantren* certainly have a positive impact for the local community, and if this practice is consistently and sustainably implemented by all *pesantren*, it is very likely to help maintain clean water availability for future generations. In fact, the proactive role of *pesantren* in managing clean water usage could potentially prevent the clean water crisis in Indonesia, which, according to the World Water Forum (Asianpost.id 2024), will start being felt in 2025 and 2040. Then, by positioning themselves as leaders in environmental education and sustainability, *eco-pesantren* are helping to cultivate a new generation of environmentally conscious Muslims who can contribute to both religious and environmental causes (Herdiansyah et al. 2018).

Conclusion

Pesantren in Indonesia have emerged as a critical nexus of education and sustainability, showcasing their ability to align Islamic principles with contemporary environmental challenges. The concept of *eco-pesantren* reflects a transformative approach where traditional Islamic boarding schools integrate environmental stewardship into their educational framework. By adopting innovative practices such as waste banks and ablution water recycling, *eco-pesantren* demonstrate how faith-based institutions can contribute to global efforts in climate change mitigation and sustainability.

As centers of education, *pesantren* play a dual role: nurturing spiritual and moral values while equipping students with practical knowledge and skills to address real-world challenges. The *eco-pesantren* model bridges these dimensions by embedding sustainability into both curricula and daily practices. Waste bank initiatives illustrate how *pesantren* can transform waste management into opportunities for environmental education, economic empowerment, and community development. Similarly, the recycling of ablution water represents an innovative and symbolic practice that emphasizes resource conservation, reinforcing the Islamic teaching of avoiding wastefulness (*israf*) and promoting ecological mindfulness.

The role of *eco-pesantren* extends beyond their community, influencing local communities and contributing to national sustainability goals. Collaborations with government agencies, local communities, non-government organizations, and private sector entities have further amplified their impact, providing technical support, funding, and scalability. Through these efforts, *eco-pesantren* have positioned themselves as leaders in fostering environmental awareness, building community resilience, and addressing climate change.

Eco-pesantren embody the idea that education is about knowledge transmission and shaping behaviors and attitudes. They provide a living example of how religious institutions can evolve to address the pressing needs of modern society, aligning spiritual teachings with sustainable practices. By serving as a nexus of education and sustainability, *eco-pesantren* inspire a generation of environmentally conscious individuals who are equipped to contribute to both their faith and the planet.

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